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A Complete Novelette
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WILTON WEST
JACKSON COLE
RAY NAFZIGER

TWO-GUN TROUBLE
A Book-Length Action Novel
by DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

Rupture Curbed by College Physician

Essentials Used by Physician of Great Eastern University in Curing 7 out of 10 Students . . . Now Part of Amazing New Rupture Relief System

ATHLETES THROW AWAY TRUSSES. Results secured by Dr. Jay W. Seaver of Yale in treating ruptured students indicate cure in 7 out of 10 cases. Now, the essentials of the Seaver method are being given to ruptured people everywhere, as part of a great new rupture system. The coupon at the bottom of this page brings full details.

SUCTION-CELL RETAINS RUPTURE. Another important part of this new rupture system is a device which supports rupture by the Suction-Cell method, without leg straps or tortuous springs and pads. People ruptured for years tell of astonishing quick results.

30 DAYS' TEST FOR ANY RUPTURE VICTIMS. Ruptured people are now getting the complete Suction-Cell method for free proof trial. You are not obligated to part with a cent unless you can see that your rupture has been reduced in size within the trial allowed. Be sure to mail the coupon.

A SEVERE TEST. Photo above shows how Suction-Cell Retainer supports rupture under most strenuous conditions. A new Suction-Cell System is designed to give 24 hours' retention of rupture, thus giving Nature a chance to gradually shrink the opening and reduce danger of strangulation.

E. H. SCOTT. Mr. Scott, a rupture specialist of more than 20 years' experience, is a Director of the Institution now sending Suction-Cell to rupture victims for free proof trial.

WARNS AGAINST STRANGULATION. Ruptured people often forget about the danger and fatal consequences of strangulation. How to properly reduce rupture, how to reduce risk of strangulation and other interesting facts about rupture will be sent to everyone who mails the coupon on this page to John G. Homan, President, 4124 New Bank Building, Steubenville, Ohio.

BORN RUPTURED. One of the cases of rupture eliminated by the new Suction-Cell System, is that of a baby born ruptured. The mother of the baby reports Suction-Cell ended all trace of rupture. Be sure to mail the coupon now to learn the complete story.

FREE PROOF COUPON

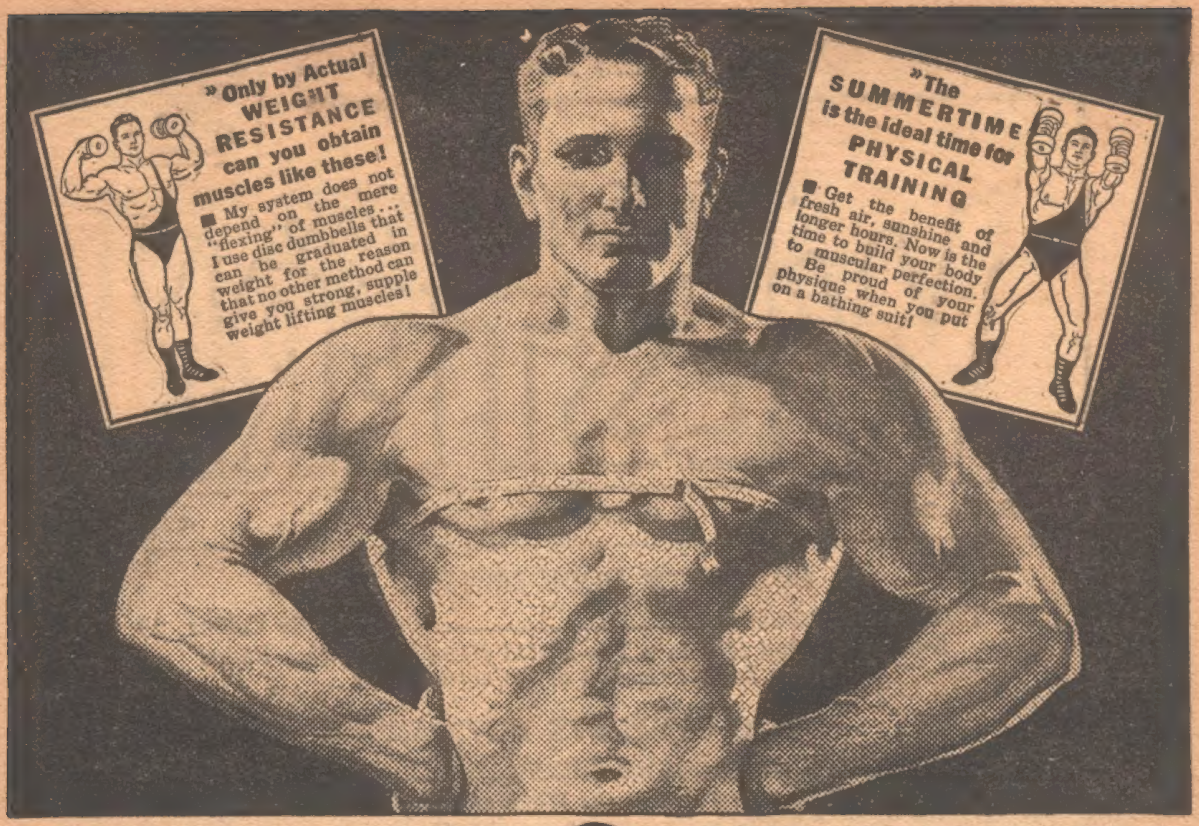
John G. Homan, President,
4124 New Bank Bldg., Steubenville, O.

Send me at once full particulars about new Suction-Cell Rupture Method, which includes the discoveries of the Yale Physician, Dr. Seaver. Also tell me how I can secure the Method with the understanding that unless it shows definite progress in the actual cure of my rupture within 30 days, it costs me nothing.

Name .....

Address .....

City..... State.....



» IF YOU DO NOT ADD AT LEAST 3 INCHES TO YOUR CHEST

... *it won't cost you one cent!*" — *Signed:* GEORGE F. JOWETT

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J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Department 4HC8
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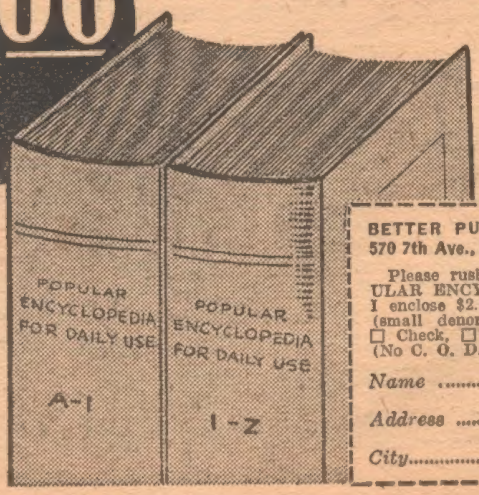

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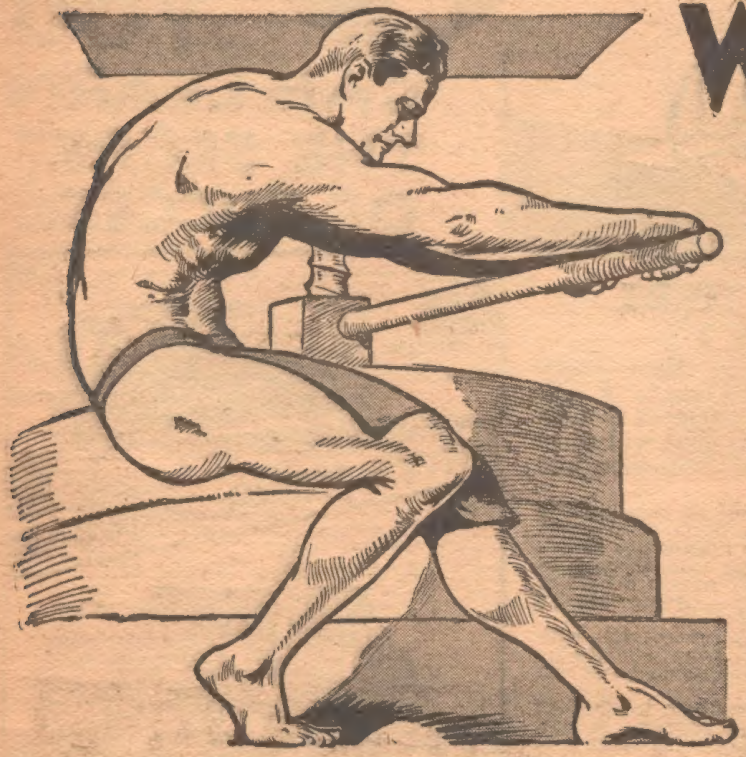

Learn About My Perfected Unique Rupture Invention!

Why worry and suffer with that rupture any longer? *Learn now about my perfected rupture invention.* It has brought ease, comfort, and happiness to thousands by assisting Nature in relieving and curing many cases of reducible hernia! *You can imagine how happy* these thousands of rupture sufferers were when they wrote me to report relief, comfort and cures! How would YOU like to be able to *feel* that *same* happiness—to sit down and write me such a message—a few months *from today?* Hurry—send coupon quick for Free Rupture Book, PROOF of results and invention revelation!

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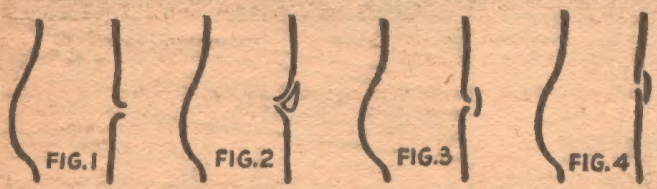
Surprisingly—continually—my perfected *Automatic* Air Cushions draw the broken parts together allowing Nature, the Great Healer, to swing into action! All the while you should experience the most *heavenly* comfort and security. *Look!* No obnoxious springs or pads or metal girdles! *No* salves or plasters! My *complete* appliance is feather-lite, durable, invisible, sanitary and *CHEAP IN PRICE!* Wouldn't YOU like to say "good-bye" to rupture worries and "hello" to NEW freedom . . . NEW glory in living . . . NEW happiness—with the help of Mother Nature and my *mysterious-acting* Air Cushion Appliances?



Shows rupture before *old-style* truss was applied.

Shows old-style truss in place. The walls of wound cannot come together. A cure is improbable.

Shows rupture before Automatic Air Cushion is in place.

Shows perfected invention in place. *Note* how edges are drawn together in *normal position.*

PROOF!

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"Have no further use for your Appliance as I'm O. K. Wore it a year. I now can lift 400 lbs.. without any fear."—John L. Heiges, 635 W. Locust St., York, Pa.

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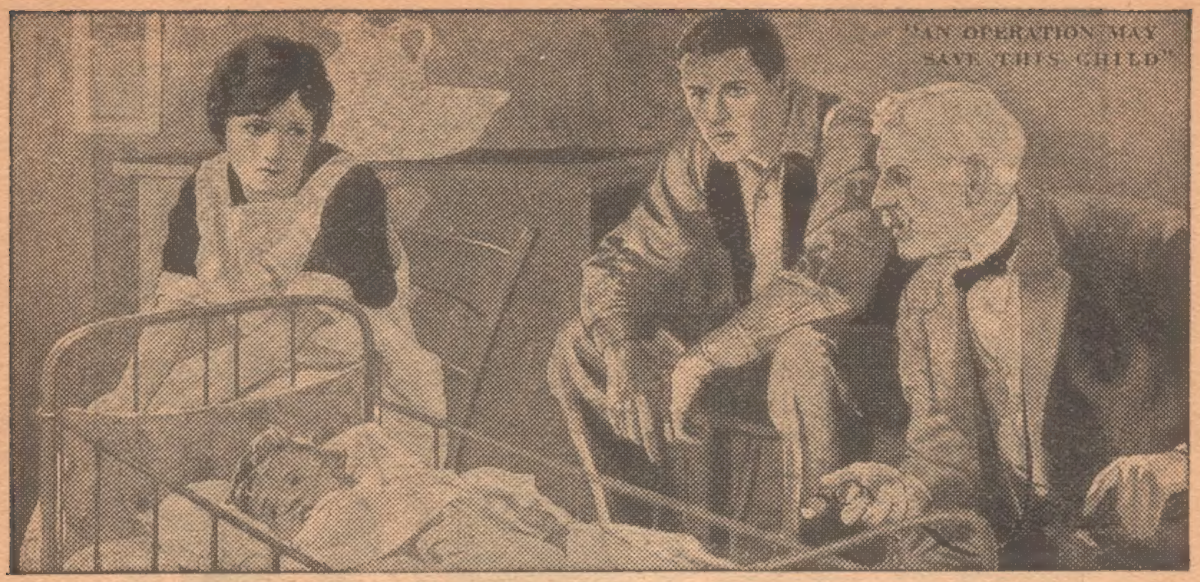

"...and I had no money"

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"I know what I am talking about! I'll never forget the time when my child's life was at stake. Not an extra dollar to my name. If it hadn't been for friends. . . .

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As the other pulled trigger,

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CHAPTER I

Hired Killer

WHERE the piñon-bordered Apache Trail angles around a pagoda-shaped butte, just before it dips into the dry, rocky bed of Cimarron Creek, Wess Sloan sharply drew rein. For the last half hour he had been watching a wagon loaded with corral poles come down the trail toward him.

Now he saw, about a quarter-mile away, between him and the approaching wagon, a man crouched behind a rock near the trail.

Sunlight glinted from the man's rifle. Murder was about to be done.

Sloan jerked his Winchester from its scabbard, slapped it to his shoulder, took quick aim at the crown of the dry gulcher's hat. Not knowing what the fight was about, he did not wish to kill.

As he squeezed the trigger, Sloan saw the dry gulcher's rifle leap up. In almost the same instant in which the ambusher fell back, scuttling away, the driver slid from his seat

Bullets and Bad Men in a Two-Fisted Novel of Exciting

Sloan's gun-barrel arced

Trouble

Length Novel

OTIS COLLINS

"Bob-Wire Bobcat," etc.

on the corral poles to the ground, as the team broke into a run.

Three lightning-quick shots Sloan pumped into the brush in which the murderer vanished. Tight-lipped, cursing because he had not aimed three inches lower, he roweled his big blue roan toward the runaway team.

"Blue, old boy, we come into the Cimarron country lookin' for trouble," he told the swiftly running horse. "Looks like we gonna find it."

Before he could reach it, the runaway team swerved from the road and spurted down a boulder-strewn slope, the careening wagon leaving a stream of corral poles in its wake. A grove of jackpines finally stopped them.

The dry gulcher had disappeared, probably into one of the numerous draws. Sloan flung himself from the saddle beside the driver, who sprawled face down in a patch of rabbit brush. He turned the dead man over

"Right between the eyes," he mut-

Range War Waged for the Control of Rainbow Valley

Sampson Rock

tered. "Nice lookin' kid, too. Wonder which side he was on, Sampson Rock's or the nesters'?"

He strode to the boulder behind which the shot had been fired. Searching in the matted grass, he discovered a silver concha, such as some men in the Southwest use to ornament their belts and hatbands.

The silver disk, about the size of a twenty-five cent piece, was indented by a bullet. Sloan's bullet had cut the concha from the murderer's hatband. He slipped the bit of evidence into his pocket, stood up, as he heard the rapid beat of hoofs.

A RIDER, bent low over the horn, topped a ridge in the direction from which had come the wagon. Even from this distance, Sloan saw that the rider was a girl. As she came nearer he observed that her hair was red, that her face bore a similarity to that of the dead man.

He needed only to hear her low moan of anguish to assure him that the murdered man was her brother.

At a discreet distance, he was untangling Blue's thick mane when at length the girl came up to him. For a moment they did not speak.

Despite the terrible grief that blanched her cheeks, that lay raw and bleeding behind her hazel eyes, the girl was beautiful. Her scuffed boots, overall breeches and faded flannel shirt only emphasized her latent strength, her lithe grace.

Sloan's piercing eyes looked at her out of a lean, still face the color of bronze. Low on his right thigh, a cedar-handled .45 was thonged against slick cowhide chaps. Its mate hung at his left hip. One peculiar thing marked Sloan for the man he was: his right hand was more tanned and weatherbeaten than his left. Sloan never wore a glove on his right hand.

The girl was looking at the telltale hand as she asked, "Do you know anything about—about what happened?"

"I seen it happen, Miss," Sloan told her gently, and explained what he knew of the murder. "He was gone when I got here."

HER grief-stricken eyes fixed on the crumpled figure beside the trail, the girl seemed not to be listening. She turned to him. "Who are you?"

"Name o' Sloan, Miss. Wess Sloan."

The girl jerked erect.

"Wess Sloan, the outlaw!" she jeered. "The man whose name mothers use to frighten their children with, when they're bad—instead of the devil's! Another one of Rock's hired killers!"

Sloan did not deny the accusation. "Do you figger one of Rock's men did that?" he asked.

"Who else but Rock's dry gulchers would—murder my brother? They got Dad last year, and now Lin's gone." A sudden flash of fury drove the sorrow from her face. Her little fingers clenched the butt of the .38 strapped to her slim waist. "If I thought you did it, I'd shoot you

like a dog. But I know you didn't. Rock's assassins always run."

"Is that Rock's way of fightin'?"

"You ought to know. Aren't you one of his gang?"

"I come down here to fight for Rock, at so much a day," Sloan admitted. "I ain't heard yet what the war's about, but I ain't throwin' in with a lot of rattlesnakes, neither."

The girl regarded him closely. "That's exactly what you are doing if you fight for Sampson Rock," she declared. "He's out to drive every small rancher from Rainbow Valley, and he doesn't care how it's done. He's got everybody scared to death.

"Dad had the little fellows pretty well organized to put up a fight, before they got him. Now, there's nobody left to fight Rock—except me. I'll never give in to him, no matter how many hired killers he brings into the country."

"What outfit you runnin', Miss?"

"I'm Judy Blake, and I own the Box B."

"Well, Miss Blake, you got a new hand."

JUDY'S hazel eyes opened wide with astonishment. "You don't mean you're coming on our side? Why, with you, with Wess Sloan, we would have a chance. But—" The smile that for an instant lighted her face vanished. "I can't pay you anything right now. You see, most of my stock has been rustled, and—"

She hesitated, glancing toward a rider clattering down the trail. "It's Andrews, my foreman," she said.

Sloan saw a tall, loosely built man, with a ropey yellow mustache drooping over the lower part of his sallow face, ride up to the dead boy. After a long, careful look, Andrews rode over to where Judy and Sloan stood. For some reason, he could not tell why, Sloan felt instant dislike.

"Shore tough, Judy," consoled Andrews, slanting his pale blue eyes

Wess Sloan

at the big cowboy whose right hand was so strangely unlike his left. "Know who done it?"

The girl shook her head.

"Who's this *hombre?*"

"Why don't you ask me?" Sloan challenged quietly.

A silent snarl lifted the ends of Andrews' scraggy yellow mustache. Unseen by Sloan, his big-jointed fingers closed over the butt of his gun.

"Yeah? Well, I got plenty questions to ask, but mebbe the jedge kin ask 'em better 'n I kin," the man suddenly mouthed. "Put 'em up!"

SLOAN'S right hand swooped downward, his gun roared. Andrews half fell from the saddle, cursing, wringing his empty, bullet-scorched hand. Neither he nor Judy had seen the chained-lightning draw.

"Migawd!" Andrews gasped, gray of face. "Who are you, anyway?"

Sloan blew the smoke from his gun barrel. "It don't matter to you, long as you mind yore own business."

Andrews' shifty eyes lighted with a hint of boldness. "Well, I reckon it's my business when I find a strange gunman on Box B range, an' young

Salt Peters

Blake layin' dead over there. You may be hell-on-wheels on the draw, an' have yore gun notched clear to the bar'l, but you'll find out that Sam Rock ain't got all the law hog-tied in this valley nor all the cattle stole.

"An' as long as I'm foreman of the Box B, he's gonna have a hard time doin' it, with all his hired killers. Come on, Judy. We got work to do."

"Be careful," the girl whispered as she passed Andrews. "That's Wess Sloan."

THE effect of that name on the foreman was comical. His mouth fell open, his eyes bulged out.

"Whyn't you say so?" he whispered hoarsely. Without another word or look, he spurred his horse toward the wagon.

Foot in stirrup, Sloan looked earnestly at Judy. "I'm shore sorry about what happened," he said. "I'm goin' to do all I can to make it right. Be seein' you soon as I notify Rock our agreement's off."

"But I can't pay you anything right now. And Rock—why, he'll never let you get out of town alive."

"*Quien sabe*—who knows, as the Mex say," Sloan said lightly as he swung to saddle. "So long."

"So long," the girl answered, with a look that plainly said, "Good-by."

CHAPTER II

Mavericked Guns

NIGHT had fallen when Sloan rode into Cimarron, the cowtown where he had agreed to meet Sampson Rock. Most of the low, squat adobe buildings that lined both sides of the wide, rutted main street were mere bulking shadows in the velvety blackness. The little town, however, was far from being asleep.

Broad beams of yellow light slanted from the windows and open doors of a dozen buildings, whose hitch racks were filled with saddled, drooping-headed horses. Wooden sidewalks resounded to the thump of high-heeled boots. Wild bursts of reckless laughter, the scrape of fiddles, a high-pitched, lilting fragment of song from some full-throated *señorita*—

No, Cimarron was decidedly not asleep at this time.

"'Where it's day all day in the daytime,'" mused Sloan, recalling the song of an old Colorado mining camp. "'An' there ain't no night in Creede.'"

He hitched in front of a dingy barber shop. It was his intention to get the drift of this range war from the barber, as well as to treat himself to a much-needed shave.

As he strode into the little shop, momentarily blinded by the glare from the oil lamp suspended above the barber chair, a small, wiry, blue-eyed waddy, whose faded Levis were corkscrewed into badly rundown boots, got up briskly from his chair propped against the wall. He bow-legged toward Sloan, a broad grin cracking his sunburned face.

"Howdy, Wess!" he greeted noisily, sticking out a rope-calloused

hand. "Thought it was 'bout time you was gettin' yer horns tangled up in another range fight."

"Salt Peters, you old son of a gun! What're you doin' in this part of the country? Thought I left you up Johnson County way."

"Yeah, but not planted," the half-pint grinned. "This here's another war. I reckon she's 'bout over now, though, seein's both of us is here."

SLOAN sat down, stretched out his long, muscular legs, and began to build a cigarette.

He nodded questioningly toward the Mexican barber indolently honing a razor.

"He no spik," said Salt Peters.

"Well, Salt," Sloan regarded his old friend steadily. "What's Rock's game?"

"Just a case of the big frawg tryin' to eat up all the little frawgs, that's all. I'll say one thing for Rock, though," Salt nodded. "He's thorough. Don't stop at nothin' to get what he's after, an' plenty willin' to pay for havin' it done."

"How's the other side holdin' out?"

"The little fellers? They ain't got a chance. Y' see, Rock runs the only bank in town, an' the ranches he can't get by foreclosure, why, he jest robs of all their stock. If the ranchers could ever get together an' stop squabblin' 'mongst themselves, they might have a little show. As it is, Rock's got everything his own way. He even owns the tinhorn John Law."

"An' what's Rock's idea in gettin' hold of Rainbow Valley?"

Salt Peters winked knowingly. "They tell me, some railroad is figgerin' on bustin' this valley wide open. Land that Rock holds mortgages on at ten dollars an acre will be wuth a hundred. An' the land he can get for nothin', he won't need to pay even ten dollars for."

Sloan flicked his cigarette butt

Drag Durkin

into a corner, rose to his feet. He looked Peters squarely in the eye. "You ain't fightin' for no such polecat as Sam Rock, are you?" he asked levelly.

THE buckaroo's smile faded from his dare-devil face. "Why, shore I am. What difference does it make to me which side I'm fightin' on, so long as I'm fightin'—an' drawin' five bucks a day? What you mean, anyhow?"

"I mean I'm throwin' in with the other side."

Salt Peters stared in astonishment. "You gone loco, ain't you, Wess? What do you keer which side comes out on top? We're both gun fighters, ain't we? You an' me writ our names big in the Johnson County war. An' our guns won Charley Lovell's ruckus agin that sheep herder, didn't they? There's plenty other times we've shot some *hombre* plump outa trouble for the fun there was in it."

One of Sloan's rare smiles played for a moment over his stern lips. "Maybe you was doin' it for fun, Salt. But my gun always was drawed on the side of the under dog cowman. This here country belongs

to him, an' I aim to do my part to see him keep it."

"You ain't tellin' me nothin', Wess," Peters said slowly, sadly. "I knowed all the time you wouldn't like Rock's company. I was jest tryin' to save you from—well, Rock's herded together twenty-five or thirty of the wust killers he could find, Drag Durkin among 'em. The ranchers ain't got nothin'."

"They've got me," Sloan said quietly. "You're comin' along with me, ain't you, Salt?"

Peters' face looked strained and old. "Our trails done parted, Wess. I'm fightin' on the side that pays the most. Next time we meet, I reckon—"

"You better come foggin'," Sloan finished calmly.

FROM the barber shop he went directly to the Sixty-Six saloon, Rock's headquarters. Since he had agreed to fight for Sampson Rock, Sloan felt it his duty to tell Rock he had changed his mind. Back of this, though, was a compelling desire to see this man whose ambition it was to be king and absolute boss of Rainbow Valley.

The saloon into which Sloan high-heeled was no different from a hundred others out in the cactus country, except that it was larger. At the long bar, to the left as one entered, were slouched a dozen hard-eyed, heavily armed men. A double row of gaming tables faced the bar. Behind them were the faro counter and roulette layout, and back of that a couple of pool tables. Beyond was a narrow hall with rooms opening onto it. Here Sloan's gaze was directed.

Heedless of the suspicious glances shot at him, Sloan strode up to the bar. The barkeep, a flat-faced, kettle-bellied fellow whose collar was buttoned closely about his throat, probably to conceal a rope scar, looked at him with dull, sunken eyes.

"I'm lookin' for Sam Rock," Sloan told him.

The bartender busied himself with his cloth. "I don't know whether Mr. Rock's here, or not," he answered. "What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't say."

The aproned gent opened his mouth to say something smart, but a second look at the big stranger's face caused him to change his mind. "Maybe you better tell me," he suggested. "So I can see whether he wants to see you or not."

"Wess Sloan."

The silence that instantly gripped the saloon was astounding. So absolute was the hush that the dying click of the little ivory ball in its groove sounded like the crack of rifles. Every pair of eyes in the room was focused on the tall, well-knit form of the gun fighter who had the reputation of being the fastest man on the draw since Wyatt Earp trod the bloody sidewalks of Dodge, and John Wesley Hardin rolled his gun for his twenty-third kill.

The flat-faced barkeep shuffled off toward the back, and returned. Still the oppressive, sinister silence remained unbroken, save for the scrape of a nervous boot on the hard-packed dirt floor.

"All right," the bartender said, with an unconscious tug at his tightly buttoned collar. "Last door to the left, end of the hall."

SLOAN looked at no man as he strode down the lane between the bar and the card tables. He had no enemies here, unless it was some drunken cowboy or four-flush gunman, jealous of Sloan's reputation, who hungered for the glory of dusting off the famous gun slinger.

Sloan marked well the location of

Sloan made his famous draw—inconceivably swift

Rock's private room, on the alley. He tried the back door, found it unlocked. He listened a second to the murmur of voices behind Rock's door; then he turned the knob and went in.

In the dim light that struggled feebly through the heavy layers of smoke that filled the room, Sloan saw four men seated at a round table on which were a box of cigars and a partly emptied bottle of whisky. Sampson Rock, he recognized at once—a square-jawed, steely-eyed, powerfully built man of fifty-odd, whose thick, grizzled hair stood up on his big head like the quills of a porcupine. The slim, colorless, cold-eyed man opposite Rock would be the notorious killer, Drag Durkin, whose Colt butt, it was said, bore fifteen notches.

A queer sensation passed over Sloan as his eyes met those of Drag Durkin. Instinctively he felt the killer's silent challenge to his gun power, knew that some day he and Durkin would decide this point from flaming muzzles.

The nickel-plated star on the opened vest of the fat, squirrel-eyed young man who faced the door proclaimed him the sheriff. Newlon, his handle was, so Salt Peters had said. The remaining gent, he with the black, beady eyes set in a long, dark

face, was the only man in the room Sloan had ever met. He had met this fellow with a herd of stolen cows, had helped send him to the Big House. Dick Calabrese was his name, and he came from Montana.

But no man there wore a hat banded with silver conchas, such as he had shot from the hat of Lin Blake's murderer.

Sampson Rock kicked his chair back against the wall. He stood almost as tall as Sloan, a bull of a man, exuding strength and power. He thrust out a hand the size and color of a well-worn saddlebag.

"Boys, this here's Wess Sloan!" he boomed. "Reckon you've heard tell of him. Howdy, Sloan. I'm Rock."

SLOAN ignored the outstretched hand. "Rock," he said quietly, "I just dropped in to tell you that agreement between you an' me is off." Rock's thick neck corded with a sudden rush of anger. His big hands clutched the back of his chair in a white-knuckled grip. In the brief moment of silence, Sloan thought he heard the soft shuffle of feet past the door.

"Agreement's off?" roared Rock. "You hired out to me, didn't ya?"

"I hired out for a range war, yeah. But I changed my mind. I thought I was goin' to work for a man, not a murderin' coyote. I'm fightin' against you, Rock."

A deathly hush followed Sloan's calm announcement. There was no sound, save the loud ticking of the watch in the sheriff's vest pocket; no movement, except the quick tightening of lips, the narrowing of eyes.

Then Sloan caught the furtive flash of Calabrese's gun wrist. Sloan made his famous draw, an inconceivably swift downward swoop, like a boy throwing a ball underhand.

Dick Calabrese's gun roared, the shot driving into the floor. Sloan's bullet was in Calabrese's brain before the Montana bad man had cleaned leather. Like lightning, Sloan's left gun flicked into his hand. His eyes, drawn to mere needle points, fastened on the three men. Not one moved a muscle, unless it was the fat, white-faced sheriff, licking at his dry lips.

"Every man put his hands on the table—quick!" Sloan ordered as he backed toward the door.

"We'll meet again, Sloan!" Drag Durkin spoke for the first time, each clipped word clinking like a chip of ice against the sides of a glass.

"I'll be ready," Sloan promised grimly. Again he experienced the peculiar foreboding that he would kill Durkin, or Durkin would kill him. He backed through the door, closed it. Three great strides took him to the alley door. He turned the knob. The door was locked. He recalled the footsteps shuffling past the door.

Swiftly he strode down the narrow hall and into the glare of the saloon lights. Here he slowed down, hands swinging easily at his sides. Every eye in the room was fixed upon Sloan, with the exception of the barkeep's, who suddenly remembered that he had lost a corkscrew beneath the counter. Sloan was halfway to the door when Rock's angry voice thundered from the back hall:

"Stop that man! Kill Sloan!"

CHAPTER III

Gulch Thunder

WESS SLOAN wheeled, backing steadily toward the door, guns still in holsters. At least twenty cold-blooded killers, all armed to the teeth, were before him and alongside him. Yet such was the terrible reputation Sloan bore as a gun fighter, such was the dominating force, the power of the man, that

not one gun was drawn against him.

As Rock, closely followed by Drag Durkin, but not by the sheriff, burst into the saloon, the batwings swung shut behind Sloan. Sloan was wheeling the big blue roan into the street as the doors of the saloon spread wide, vomiting a gush of Rock-cursed, Rock-whipped gunmen toward the snorting, rearing horses that lined the hitchrail.

Sloan plunged Blue into the pitch blackness. Much as he would have liked to swap lead with these *hombres*, he knew this was no time for a showdown. He had a big job ahead. And he would not be helping Judy Blake and the valley ranchers if he got himself murdered by Rock's pack of wolves.

He headed down the road which he had traveled into town, confident that Blue could outdistance the pursuing horses. Brief flares lighted the darkness on the backtrail; lead whined evilly over his head. He felt no need to answer these wild shots. Low he lay over the roan's outstretched neck, its streaming mane whipping his face, its fleet feet scarcely seeming to touch the trail.

He had eased up a bit, had begun to think his pursuers had given up the chase, when he saw six or eight shadowy riders dart through the brush on his right and streak toward him.

"Cut me off," Sloan muttered grimly. "They know the country better 'n I do." Sharply he wheeled Blue from the trail. But already he had been seen.

"THERE he goes!" came Rock's deep bass. "We got him, boys! Plug him, Drag!"

A bullet tore through Sloan's hat brim. He twisted in the saddle, drove two slugs at the foremost rider. Even above the double roar of his .45, the man's piercing scream rang out and he pitched from his horse to earth. Sloan hammered another bullet into the tangle of gunmen, and this time a horse went down amid a volley of curses from its rider. These casualties, which halted the Rock men, enabled Sloan to race out of six-gun range.

A deep, narrow gulch, like a ragged gash of midnight, stopped him. Straight and sheer, the black wall dropped from the clumps of yucca and greasewood that overhung it. Sloan swung from the saddle, threw hurried glances behind him. The roar of the approaching hoofs was like thunder.

Grasping the reins, he hastened along the rim of the gulch until he reached a less steep incline. Calling sharply to the horse, he slid over the rim. Together, horse and man rolled and tumbled down the wall, landing in a clump of brush.

THOUGH badly scratched, neither was hurt. Sloan tied up the horse, shook the dirt from his rifle, and clambered back up the bank.

Against the curtain of darkness, he discerned six riders spreading fanwise over the route he had taken. Sloan held his fire. He had never killed, except to save his life, and these men might pass by him.

"Look out!" yelled a sharp-eyed *hombre*. "There he is—in that there wash!"

"Get him, men!" Rock shouted.

His wolf pack answered with a blast of rifle fire toward the gulch. A bullet tore through the yucca behind which Sloan lay, plowed across his right wrist. At his first answering shot, one of the attackers slumped over his horse's neck, slipping to the ground.

Quickly taking cover behind scattered boulders, Rock's men opened up a withering fire. Driven to a boulder a few feet from the gulch rim, Sloan was pumping lead toward the powder flashes, putting up the

kind of fight that was his heritage from his outlaw dad.

All of a sudden, the attackers quit firing. Sloan could hear Rock storming and cursing at his men. He judged they were waiting for the other party to come up. He fed more cartridges into his magazine. They might get him, probably would. But he had run as far as he was going to run.

Ten minutes he waited, while his gun barrels cooled. Then he saw a man walking toward him. By the great bulk, Sloan knew it to be Rock. "Sloan!" called Rock. "We'll call off the fight if you'll let us gather up our dead an' wounded."

"All right," Sloan answered. "But don't try any tricks."

In reverential silence the men lifted two motionless figures onto the backs of horses, and withdrew. Sloan smiled grimly as he reached for makin's.

"We took that trick, Blue, old boy," he called softly to the horse nervously stamping beneath him. "But we ain't started yet, you an' me— Hello, what's that?"

He was staring at a red tongue of flame that leaped suddenly from the earth to the west of him. Almost as he spoke, dancing spots of fire appeared all around him!

Cursing Rock for his treachery, Sloan whipped a desperate look down the gulch. A leaping, quivering wall of flame met his astonished gaze. Choked with dwarf junipers, brush, and tinder-dry grass, the gulch would allow the sweep of fire as if it were a chimney.

TRAPPED. Out there in the glare of the rapidly growing fire, he would be shot down before he went six feet. The only escape was down the gulch. He would have to force Blue through a killing sheet of flame, as well as face the bullets of men safely hidden behind boulders. Sloan slid down the adobe wall, untied the trembling horse, leaped into the saddle.

"This here is liable to be our last ride, old man," he muttered to the horse as he shoved his boots tightly into the stirrups. "But if I have to go, that's the way I wanter—you an' me together, Blue. Let's go!"

The big roan needed no urging. With a loud snort of terror he plunged down the gulch, headed toward the boiling wall of fire. Crackle of flame. Swirling eddies of ashes and flying sparks. Hellish heat that scorched a man through his clothes, blistered his face, blinded him. Sweeping round a projecting shoulder, the horse swerved sidewise, squealing in terror.

THE racing wedge of fire, now so close upon them, was six feet high. Never would Sloan be able to force the horse into such a furnace. Horrible death there, for horse and man.

He raced back up the gulch, shooting desperate glances at the walls that were too steep for even Blue to climb. Hotter grew the air, so filled with smoke and ashes that, even through his handkerchief, Sloan could scarcely breathe.

Not much more of this could he stand; already he was becoming dizzy. And at the head of the gulch, rifles would be waiting to mow him down.

Rock had him. The great gun fighter, Wess Sloan, was caught like a rat in a trap. Here was another lesson for anyone who dared oppose the will of Sampson Rock. A harsh laugh burst from Sloan's seared lips. Well, he would make them shoot him. He would go down with blazing guns, anyhow.

Looking up, he saw what appeared to be the stump of a tree overhanging the gulch rim. He set Blue on his haunches, slipped his lariat from its strap. In another moment a noose

was whirling to the side of him. Four casts he made at the stump before he dabbed the loop over it.

With wildly beating heart, he pulled back. The stump held. He headed the quivering horse into the sharply inclined wall, caught firm hold of the manila rope.

"Let's go, Blue!" he yelled, sinking in the rowels.

Puffing and snorting, the horse dug its hoofs into the soft bank, began to plow upward. Legs clamped tightly to the heaving body, Sloan pulled on the rope. Pulled until the sinews in his arms burned like red-hot iron, and his shoulder muscles all but burst through his shirt. Slowly, inch by bitter inch, horse and man fought their way up the wall to within two feet of the top.

Here, a perpendicular drop stopped them. Hurriedly fastening the taut rope around the horn, Sloan stood erect in the saddle, sprang upon the bank. By main strength he dragged the horse up beside him.

Someone shouted in alarm. A bullet whistled over Sloan's head. He vaulted to the saddle, jerked out his brace of cedar-handled guns. Beyond the rapidly receding fringe of fire, he caught an orange-yellow flash. The deafening zoom of the bullet still in his ears, he triggered two swift shots just below the flash. From that direction came no more shots. He spurred Blue into a run.

THE crackle of rifle fire and brush fire filled the air. Bent low over the horse's neck, Sloan was running for a black patch of junipers. A rider appeared suddenly in front of him. Two six-guns criss-crossed their fire in the instant before Blue rammed the other horse. A fearsome shriek, a flesh-ripping threshing of steel-shod hoofs, and Blue was again on his feet. The other horse scrambled up and ran away, leaving its rider motionless on the ground.

In the juniper thicket, Sloan, stretched out behind a log, waited in grim suspense. The small remainder of his cartridges was piled beside his hand. But no marauders came nigh. Rock's buzzards evidently had enough.

Climbing wearily into the saddle, Sloan rode for about a mile, until he came to a grassy glade tucked between low ridges. Here, beside a little stream, he staked his horse. And as he unrolled his blankets, he saw a great fire toward the north.

"Haystacks," guessed Sloan. "Another poor devil burnt out because he wouldn't sell out to Rock. Maybe it's the Box B haystacks."

Into the gun slinger's eyes came a terrible light. "Wess, old timer," he said to himself, "you ain't started to fight yet."

CHAPTER IV

The New Hand

SLOAN broke camp with the first glow of light in the east. For an hour he had been riding on what, he figured from Andrews' remarks of yesterday, was Box B range. Mile after mile of low, undulating hills he passed, carpeted with gnarled black sagebrush and nutritious buffalo grass. There were little meadows knee-deep in native hay, and crystal streams densely bordered with willows. But not a cow critter did he see.

"Fences all down, too," Sloan observed. "Ain't no use fixin' 'em, though. There ain't no cows to get out."

The blood-red disk of the sun, swinging over a distant battlement, slanted broad golden beams into the lilac veils that rose from the floor of the valley he was now entering. He saw spread before him, at the edge of a grove of tall cottonwoods,

a large, rambling adobe ranch house. Barns and corrals there were, in plenty.

But as Sloan drew closer he saw that the corrals were as empty as the range, that all the buildings were badly in need of repair. Except for the column of smoke that curled lazily from the chimney of the ranch house kitchen, the place might as well have been deserted. He ground-hitched his horse and, leaving his guns hanging on the saddle, strode up to the door of the bunk house.

"Hello!" he called.

SILENCE for a moment. Then a voice answered thickly, "Whatcha want?"

Sloan pushed open the door. In amused curiosity he looked at the four bleary-eyed punchers still stretched out beneath their tarps. One of them, a big-boned, tow-headed fellow, evidently the one who had spoken, sat up, and regarded the intruder with a sullen stare.

"You fellas musta been ridin' out a stampede last night," Sloan remarked indifferently.

"Mebbe we was, an' mebbe we wasn't," scowled the tow-head. "What's it to you?"

Sloan nodded toward a connecting door. "Foreman restin', too?"

"Who, Andrews? You'll find him over there in the cottonwoods doin' a little grave diggin', I reckon. What you want him fer, fella?"

"I'm workin' here."

This remark brought the other three men upright in their bunks, grinning broadly. The big blond cowboy slapped his thigh in glee. "Ho, that's good! Well, you've hit the right spread, stranger. Plenty work here!"

"Then, why ain't you doin' it?"

"'Cause we're leavin' here—if it's any of yer business."

Sloan concealed his anger behind a scornful smile. "Just what I thought. Ridin' out. Fine lot of cowboys you are. Sneakin' off with your tails between your legs, just when the boss needs you most."

Quickly, expertly, he sized up the quitters. Two of them, tough looking little runts, he passed by with a glance. The long, lanky, thin-faced fellow who was pulling on his boots in a lower bunk held Sloan's attention for a moment. Then his look shifted back to the big tow-head.

Angrily, the Swede returned his gaze. "Who in tarnation are you, anyhow?" he blustered. "Bustin' in here while a man's in bed, an' givin' him a mouthful of free advice!"

"That's tellin' him, Swede," cheered Slim, clamping on his hat.

Sloan chose to ignore the Swede's bluff. "Look here, fellas," he said earnestly, "I'm ridin' for the Box B, as I said. I happen to know somethin' of the range war goin' on 'round here; an' from the looks of things, the boss shore needs your help."

"SAY, fella," argued Swede, "we ain't members of the family. We're jest thirty-a-month cowhands, an' we can't get that. Who's fool enough to run the risk of gettin' bushwhacked by Sam Rock's gunnies every time he climbs into a gulch—an' Rock payin' good money?"

"Yeah, that's what I say," echoed Slim.

"An' how!" grinned the two runts.

"An' here's what I say," Sloan barked. "Every one of you yaller polecats get outa this bunk house an' get to work—quick as you know how!"

In utter astonishment the punchers looked at the big, bronzed man who stood in the middle of the floor, giving them orders. Swede's glance flicked to the six-shooter sticking from the holster hung on the foot of

his bunk, as quickly returned to Sloan's still eyes. The two half-pints sat motionless, looking past Sloan to the open door.

"You hear me," Sloan grated. "You're stayin' an' you're likin' it. Savvy?"

Swede got to his feet. So did the others, warily encircling Sloan. "I don't know who you think you are, fella," said Swede. "But you'll soon find out who we are. Slim—grab him!"

SLOAN spun around, just as Slim's long arms encircled his waist. At the same moment, one of the runts sank a hard jab between his ribs. Sloan grinned. These rannies had some fight left in them. One well-placed sock between the eyes of the little fellow drove him backward against the wall. He slid shapelessly to the floor.

"Come on, boys!" yelled Swede, charging Sloan like a mad bull.

Under the terrific impact, Sloan was knocked half across the room. Then Slim tripped him, but he was up almost as soon as he hit the floor. He tore loose Slim's hold, caught him by the waist, whirled him in the air. At the other runt he hurled the kicking Slim, slamming both through the door. He wheeled, fists up.

"You an' me, Swede."

"I'll show you I ain't scairt of you!" Swede gritted, driving a ham-like fist against Sloan's cheek with all the power of his thick shoulders behind the blow.

Sloan grinned as his head snapped back. Then they mixed, in a good old-fashioned rib-smashing, b o d y-thumping slugging match. The Swede could hit like a battering ram, but he wasn't very accurate. And when one of his pile-driver haymakers whistled past Sloan's ear, Sloan whipped a brace of dynamite-packed uppercuts to the sandy-whiskered chin, followed with a wrist-deep sock in the bread basket.

Swede jack-knifed, clapping both hands to his belly. He eased himself onto a bunk, groaning like a horse with colic. That ended the fight quickly.

While Sloan mopped with his handkerchief at a cut on his cheek, Slim and the two runts sidled up near the white-faced Swede. Slim looked admiringly at the two-fisted cyclone.

"Who—who are you?"

"Name o' Sloan."

"Not—"

"Yeah. Wess Sloan."

The three rannies shrank back, eyes bulging with amazement and fear. Even Swede forgot to groan.

"Wess Sloan!" he mumbled. "Whyn't you tell a man? Gawd—think of me tryin' to lick Wess Sloan!"

"Well, I've signed up with the Box B now," Sloan said quietly. "What you fellers say?"

A loud whoop was Sloan's answer. "That's all this here valley needs," said Slim. "A man like you to lead 'em, an' show Rock we ain't scairt of his buzzard crew."

"All right, then," said Sloan. "Let's go."

COMING through the bunk house door, he faced Andrews, who carried an irrigation shovel across his shoulder. An ugly snarl lifted a corner of the foreman's yellow mustache.

"What you doin' in that bunk house?" he demanded.

"I'm workin' here, Andrews."

Andrews' loose under lip sagged in amazement. He laughed mirthlessly. "Nothin' wrong with your gall, anyhow. I'm onto yer game, Sloan. You just wanter spy on the Box B for Sam Rock—an' be near Judy Blake, that's what.

"Bigawd, you got nerve! After murderin' her brother—" At the awful look that came into Sloan's eyes,

the foreman's snarl died in his throat with a sickening gurgle; his face froze.

"That's a lie, Andrews," Slim said truculently. "Sloan's a heap sight better man than you ever was."

"I'll say he is," agreed Swede, rubbing his jaw.

"Andrews," purred Sloan, "I'm killin' you for sayin' that. With my fists."

"Wait a minute," begged the foreman, making a ghastly attempt to smile. "Mebbe I spoke too quick. But you got to admit, Sloan, it shore 'peared like—"

"Drop that shovel."

"Like—"

Springing sidewise, Andrews cut viciously at Sloan's head with the shovel. Sloan leaped back to avoid the cowardly blow, but he was not quite quick enough. The sharp edge of the shovel caught his left shoulder a glancing blow, instantly numbing it. He was blind for a second, sure that his collarbone was broken.

Again the shovel swished through the air. Sloan flung his body forward, caught the harmless swing of the handle with his left arm. Before Andrews could again lift the shovel, Sloan's fist smacked him full in the face.

Andrews attempted to run back, so that he could get in a skull-crashing blow with the shovel. But Sloan was pushing him too fast. With a rasping curse he flung down the implement, struck out with both fists.

RIGHT away Sloan knew Andrews was no better with his fists than with his gun. Head held high and back, lunging out at random, he seemed only to be looking for a chance to break and run. Sloan, letting loose a rain of stiff rights and lefts, had drawn back his arm to shoot home a sleep maker, when he became conscious of a girl running swiftly toward him.

At once his skinned knuckles dropped to his sides. He turned and faced Judy Blake. In her clinging dark blue dress, and with her mass of coppery hair bound with a narrow ribbon of the same color, Sloan scarcely recognized her as the cowgirl of yesterday.

"WHAT does this mean?" cried the girl, her beautiful face white with anger. "Fighting with my foreman like a wild beast when—when—" She glanced at the room in the house where the shades were tightly drawn, and her voice broke.

"I'm shore sorry, Miss Blake," said Sloan.

"It was all Andrews' fault," Slim burst in. "He 'cused Sloan of bein' in cahoots with Rock."

"An' Sam Rock better watch out," Swede said grimly.

Andrews looked at Judy incredulously. "You lettin' *him* ride for you—one of Rock's killers?"

"Yes," Judy answered promptly. "And *I'm* still giving the orders here, Andrews." She motioned Sloan aside.

"I want you to ride over to Jim Hardin's ranch. It's the second ranch the other side of Sagehen Creek. Follow the county road and you can't miss it. Tell Hardin I sent you. He will help you arrange for a meeting with the other ranchers."

Suddenly Judy smiled. "Much obliged for what you did to my cowboys. Andrews knows cows, but he can't handle men."

Sloan grinned. "Oh, me an' the boys just got acquainted, that's all. They're all right. So long, boss."

As Sloan went toward his horse, he glanced at Andrews. The foreman's face was warped with deadly hatred, unmistakable menace.

"I ain't finished with you yet, Sloan," Andrews growled, turning away sullenly.

CHAPTER V

Dry Gulched

CANTERING down the dusty wagon road, Sloan kept a sharp lookout. After last night's happenings, he knew that Rock's men would be out gunning for him. If not in the open, then in the gulches over which he might pass.

He thought of his old partner Salt Peters, and his lips tightened. Could it have been Peters who murdered Lin Blake, for the money there was in it? As if in answer, the concha in his shirt pocket rattled sardonically against his cigarette papers.

The road left the sage flats and began to wind over an endless succession of alternating hill and swale, thinly sprinkled with juniper. Ahead, the mountain range that walled the opposite side of Rainbow Valley shone bright in the early morning sunlight.

Sloan became more alert, closely observing the minutest feature of the ever-changing landscape long before he came abreast of it. He unscabbarded his rifle, balanced it across his thighs.

Not a man in Sampson Rock's murdering crew, unless it be the devil-may-care Salt Peters or the cold-eyed Drag Durkin, had the nerve to face Sloan over his gun muzzles. But the glory of having rubbed him out would be but little less if the bullet came from a dry gulcher's gun. And Sloan would be just as dead.

He was thinking of this as he approached a dense thicket of scrub oak that, in solid mass, spread on each side of the road. Some strange sense of danger which, on more than one occasion, had stood him in good stead, warned him now. But he did not slacken the roan's pace, made no movement to draw the rifle closer. Only his eyes, drawn now to mere slits, darted rapidly, restlessly everywhere.

He entered the thicket. After a few yards Blue pricked up his ears, whinnied. From the scrub oaks came an answering nicker. Sloan dropped to the ground as though shot out of the saddle.

And not an instant too soon! As his left foot arced over the horse's back, a bullet struck the heel of his boot, a rifle cracked loudly.

"Blue—get on!" yelled Sloan, scudding into the brush. Belly-flat, rifle stock against cheek, he searched the thicket in front of him, not even the flicker of a leaf escaping his darting gaze. Yet somewhere out there a man was waiting for a second shot at him, waiting with finger pressed to trigger.

Suddenly there came a violent shaking of the brush, about fifty feet ahead of him. A loud curse, then two pistol shots, close together, split the air. Sloan leaped up. As he ran forward, he saw two booted legs writhing behind a clump of scrub oaks, caught a flash of nickeled steel. Another shot came, muffled.

Sloan burst through the brush like a tornado. He saw two men, one astride the other's stomach. The man on top was in the act of driving a bullet into the head of him underneath.

"Hold it!" barked Sloan.

THE man flung up his murder-filled eyes. Cursing venomously, he jerked his gun toward Sloan. Two shots boomed out, one a bare instant ahead of the other. Only an instant, but it was the difference between life and death. Drilled exactly through the bridge of the nose, the man slumped on top of his erstwhile foe, dead.

As Sloan rolled the man off, he heard a familiar oath. "Salt!" he exclaimed. "It's you that *hombre*

was about to rub out. What're you doin' here?"

Salt Peters sat up, looking curiously from his bleeding forearm to Sloan. He thrust out his hand. "Much obliged, Wess," he said simply. "You come jest in time."

Sloan pressed the offered hand. "But I don't savvy. Both of you was fightin' for Rock."

"Well, it's thisaway, Wess. I was hangin' round the Sixty-six a while ago, and' I happened to overhear a long, tall *hombre* with a big yaller mustache an' yaller eyes—"

"You don't mean Andrews, foreman of the Box B?"

"Come to think of it, I b'lieve that was his handle. Well, anyway, I overheard him tellin' this here dead gent 'bout you comin' along here, an' how he was to dry gulch you. I didn't wait to hear the rest of it. Jest got on my hoss an' fogged it here ahead of that snake. But, bigosh, he 'most got you anyway, an' me, to boot."

"Well, I'm shore thankin' you Salt," said Sloan, and added, to himself: "So that was what Andrews meant when he said he wasn't finished with me yet."

Salt grinned weakly. "I been a darn fool, Wess. But I'm on yore side now, if you want me."

"That's the right kind of talk, oldtimer. Here, let me tie up that arm. Then let's go. We got work to do."

"You'll hafta work awful fast, Wess. That four-flush lawman, Newlon, has got a big posse out for you right now."

"Well, we come down here lookin' for trouble, Salt. Let 'er come."

TWO hours later the reunited saddle buddies sighted a dust cloud down the road. Beneath the yellow pall was a herd of cattle, and riders on each side of the column.

Sloan ambled up to the point rider, a square-faced, steely-eyed man with a fighting chin. Frankly suspicious of the strangers, the man kept his right hand near the butt of his six-shooter.

"Howdy," Sloan greeted.

"Howdy," returned the point man.

"I'm lookin' for Jim Hardin," Sloan said. "Can you tell me where his spread is at?"

The heavy-set trail driver squinted keenly at Sloan:

"I'm Jim Hardin."

"Pleased to meetcha, Hardin. This here's my friend, Salt Peters. My name's Sloan, Wess Sloan."

HARDIN'S square jaw dropped an inch. He made a quick move of his right wrist, hesitated, let the heavy gun slide back into leather. "Wess Sloan! What the devil you wanter see me about?"

"I'm ridin' for the Box B," Sloan explained. "Miss Blake told me you was the man to see about gettin' these valley ranchers together."

Hardin stared, unbelieving. Then his rugged face purpled with a gush of anger. "You can't trick me, Sloan. Andrews told me all about you last night. You rotten Rock killer. Draw—you polecat!" He whipped out his gun, aimed it into Sloan's face.

"Hey!" cried Salt. "Don't you know who you're talkin' to?"

"Put up that hawg leg, you old fire-eater," Sloan advised, good-naturedly. "It shore does me good to meet up with a man that's got sand enough to fight back at Rock. I b'lieve you heard me say me an' my pardner here are throwin' in with you fellers."

Jim Hardin turned to the two lean, sunburned young cowboys who had ridden up. "Whaddye say, boys? That there big fella ain't nobody else but Wess Sloan, hisself. An' he's on our side agin Rock."

"Whoopee!" yelled one of the punchers.

"Now, we got a chance," agreed the other, with an admiring look at the famous gun fighter.

"All right," said Hardin. "Glad to have you on our side, Sloan. Now, what you wanter talk to me about?"

"About gettin' these scared rabbits that call themselves ranchers together, an' make plans for drivin' Sam Rock outa Rainbow Valley."

A WIDE grin softened Jim Hardin's bluff old face. "That's talkin, son. I'll round 'em up, an' have 'em all meet at my house tonight. You be there an'—" He broke off suddenly, eyes fixed down the road. Sloan and Peters followed his look.

"That's Sam Rock's big white hoss!" exclaimed Hardin. "Got eight or ten men with him. Comin' fast, too."

"It's me they're after," Sloan said quietly. "You men get back."

Hardin drew his rifle. "We're all on the same side, ain't we?" he snorted. "But they're too many for us. Let's hightail it for that outcroppin' over there."

All except Sloan immediately agreed to the proposal. "I'll stay here in the road, an' hold 'em off till you get there," he argued. "Old Blue there, can outrun any of them hosses an' not half try."

"Then I'm stayin', too," said Salt.

"I don't need any help," Sloan said curtly. "Get, all of you."

He rode off the road a few yards, hitched Blue behind a tall, shaggy clump of Spanish bayonet. A dozen steps away, he stretched his long frame behind a flat boulder and spilled some shells beside his trigger hand. He took careful aim above Rock's big white horse, then squeezed the trigger.

A shout went up from Rock. Immediately, three riders swung out on each side of him. Rock and the remaining two drew back out of range.

"Nice little trick, Rock," grunted Sloan. "But I'm aimin' to spoil it some."

At the lead man on his left he drove a bullet. It wasn't a hit, but it must have been close. The rider wheeled abruptly and headed out over the plain. A shot at the lead man on his right had the same effect. Sloan lay there, pumping lead, until the six riders threatened to swing in on him from the rear. Not until then did he vault into the saddle and give Blue the steel.

A savage cry rose from the throats of the Rock men. Lead zoomed around Sloan like a swarm of bees. But the great horse drew steadily away from his pursuers and in less than a minute was out of range.

To Sloan's left, about a mile distant across the sage-covered flat, loomed a jumbled heap of red rocks. It rose from the gently undulating plain like ruined cathedral spires As he looked, he saw four horses emerge from behind a low ridge and streak toward the square-topped pile of boulders.

Sloan smiled grimly. This would be as good a place as any to make a stand against Sampson Rock.

"Ride him right in, Sloan!" Hardin called as Sloan thundered up.

CHAPTER VI

Sagebrush Siege

RIDING ahead, Sloan entered a small amphitheater walled in by red soapstone boulders ranging in height from ten to forty feet. The uneven floor was cluttered with boulders and sagebrush. He wedged Blue into a cleft, flung himself down beside Salt Peters, who was stretched on his stomach, one eye squinted through a crack in the stone behind which he lay.

Salt glanced at his old saddle

buddy and grinned happily. "Hell's goin' to pop in a minute, Wess. Soon as Rock gets his hosses cavvied. Five agin nine."

"Let 'er pop, Salt." Sloan shoved the long barrel of his rifle into a jagged crevice. He spilled some cartridges beside him.

SALT reached over and grabbed his hand. "We're fightin' together again, ol'-timer. 'Member that time, up in the Jackson Hole country—" He broke off, ducked, as a bullet whined within three inches of his head, ricocheted from the opposite wall with an angry hum.

"Lay down, boys," Hardin advised. "Tex, you an' Joe keep yore danged heads down. They're crawlin' through the brush like Injuns, an' it's tall enough to hide 'em, too."

The hard-bitten old rancher looked at Sloan, and a slow smile came to his rugged, wind-reddened face. Sloan, on one knee, was sighting his rifle. His countenance was as hard and immobile as the rock on which the rifle barrel rested, his hand as steady. In every inch of his tall, sinewy body he was the supreme expression of a fighting man.

Sloan's trigger finger moved, his rifle cracked. Three hundred yards down the slope, a man leaped high into the air, flung up his arms, fell over backward.

"Migawd, man!" Hardin marveled. "I couldn't see a buffalo that far in them sage bushes, much less hit him."

"That's my pardner," Peters said proudly.

Sloan did not seem to hear. He levered another cartridge into the chamber, pressed his lean, bronzed cheek against the walnut stock. His keen eyes swept every square inch of the gray expanse that lay within his line of vision.

Suddenly the air became filled with screaming lead. The little fortress echoed to the crash and rumble of rifle and six-shooter. Chips of soapstone shot hither and thither, whining. Powder smoke was thick, acrid. Already two of the horses had been killed. Sloan froze when the second one went down. He thought it was Blue.

"I got that devil!" Peters whooped. Low against the ground he lay, feeding shells to magazine.

The cowboy called Joe uttered a low moan, settled slowly to the earth. Sloan nodded grimly as he saw blood spout from the kid's shoulder, high up. He bellied across the shell-littered enclosure, took Joe's place.

A slight movement behind a partly hidden rock caught his eye. He waited, bead drawn needle-point fine. He squeezed the trigger. The sage bushes surrounding the boulder shook violently, became still.

Rock's men suddenly stopped firing. The stark silence, in violent contrast to the deafening gun thunder of the last fifteen minutes, was sinister, fraught with dire disaster. Sloan slid over to his horse. The big roan, trembling in every muscle, white-eyed with fear, was bleeding from a deep, ragged gash in its shoulder. Sloan patted the horse's withers affectionately, dropped back to the ground.

"Look!" cried Hardin. "There goes one of 'em, ridin' off."

SLOAN'S lips tightened. "Rock's sendin' for more men, to wipe us out," he said. He looked into the strained, powder-blackened faces of the small force of defenders. Joe was out. Salt was bleeding from two wounds, but he was still grinning. Rock still had five or six men with him, all stationed in advantageous positions.

"Now's our chance," Sloan said. "We got to get outa here before them other buzzards get here."

"But, man," objected Hardin, "they got us plumb surrounded."

"Never was a surroundin' bullets couldn't cut through," said Salt, piling the small remainder of his cartridges beside his hand.

Sloan turned to the long, gangling Tex. "See that big boulder stickin' up out there? Crawl behind it an' start burnin' powder for all you're worth. Don't forget to keep yore head bogged."

THE three men looked at him in questioning silence.

"I'm goin' to slip outa here on Peters' hoss," Sloan explained. "I got a purty good idea where their cavvy is at. Goin' to scatter 'em from hell to breakfast. Mebbeso they'll fog after me. Watch for your chance, men, an' when you see it, come a-fannin'."

"Why, Sloan, you ain't got a Chinaman's chance," Hardin told him.

Sloan's reply was lost in the rattle of Tex's rifle fire. Rock's men were not slow in answering. They whipped up a shower of chips from the boulder. Sloan led Peters' stocking-footed sorrel into the open space, climbed on, shoved boots deep into stirrups. Bent low over its neck, he dashed out into the sagebrush.

At once a great shout rose from the hidden attackers. A whole drove of bullets hummed around Sloan. One whanged against his saddle horn, glanced off, searing his thigh like a redhot iron.

"Too close!" muttered Sloan.

He swerved toward a low knoll to his left. Soon he was over it. Partially protected now, he raced toward the spot where he had seen Rock's man ride away. A black gulch cleaved the earth ahead of him. It was about ten feet wide, and deep. Sloan did not draw rein. Instead he clawed the sorrel's flanks with his rowels. "Let's go, boy!"

But he was not riding Blue. With a great grunt the horse hurtled through the air, but the jump was two feet short. Pawing desperately at the crumbly bank, the horse turned a backward somersault, as Sloan left the saddle. Heavily it struck the gulch bottom, and lay still.

Scrambling up, Sloan gave one look at the horse's twisted neck. He jerked his rifle from its boot and started down the gulch at a fast trot. Above the pounding of his boot soles, there came to him the distant crash of rifles.

Peters, Hardin, and Tex were still giving Rock and his men plenty to think about.

In mid-stride, Sloan swerved back against the gulch wall. He had almost stepped on a rattlesnake coiled in the middle of the sandy bottom. A blaze of fire spurted from his swiftly drawn gun. The wedge-shaped head of the snake split in two; its rigid neck dropped among its writhing grayish brown coils. Sloan ran on.

The echoes of the shot were yet rumbling in the gulch when he heard an excited shout. That was a Rock man. Sloan's shot had betrayed his position. They were coming to rub him out.

"I got to locate that cavvy," Sloan gasped, running faster.

He came to an intersecting draw, darted into it.

"Halt!" a man shouted.

SLOAN dropped on his face, as a bullet tore at his hat. He crawled into a clump of sagebrush, gun pushed in front of him. Straining his eyes through the dense mat of leaves and branches, he saw the forms of several horses huddled about a hundred feet up the draw. But the guard he did not see.

A slug tore into the brush, missing him by inches. Sloan thumbed three lightning shots toward a dwarf

juniper from which he judged the shot to have come. There came a loud, terrified cry, and a man jumped up from behind the tree, scudded wildly up the draw. Sloan let him go. The man's back was toward him.

It was the work of a minute to cut the reins of the horses and scatter them. All except two. For Blue was hurt, and Peters needed a horse.

Up in the sagebrush, the firing had died away to a few scattered shots. Climbing out of the draw, Sloan saw Hardin coming toward him.

"We licked 'em!" yelled the old cowman. "When they seen they was afoot, they took to the draws an' snuck away like a pack of coyotes. Good work, Sloan. We licked Sam Rock, by gosh!"

A faint smile came to Sloan's lips as he reached into his shirt pocket for makin's. The smile vanished when he touched the silver concha in his pocket.

"We ain't licked Sampson Rock, Hardin," he said. "We ain't even started to lick him."

"But, gosh, man. When them other polecats of Rock's hear what we done, an' 'bout you bein' on our side —why, she's all over but the buryin'."

SLOAN dragged deep on his cigarette. "How many men can you get together, Hardin? Fightin' men."

Hardin scowled. "Well, there's maybe twenty-thirty ranchers in the valley kin fight. That's how they came to be ranchers. But they won't get together. Too busy spyin' on each other."

"You round 'em up. Tell 'em to be at yore house tonight, to help figger how to run Sam Rock outa Rainbow Valley. Peters an' me will be on hand."

"I'll round 'em up," Hardin promised. "But it's up to you to arger sense into 'em."

"All right," said Sloan. "See you tonight."

CHAPTER VII

Fight Talk

LOOKS like Hardin done a good job of roundin' up the valley ranchers," Sloan remarked to Salt Peters as he hitched Blue among the twenty-odd horses tied to the corral fence.

"An' if that wake goin' on in there means anything," laughed Peters, "we got to listen to 'zactly twenty ways to end this here war. Sounds like a flock of crows pow-wowin' in a cottonwood tree."

It was a rough gathering of men that faced Sloan and Peters as they stepped into the ranch house. They were of all ages, from the slim, apple-cheeked kid who sat on the pine table, to the grizzled old freighter with his chair leaning against the wall and his boots on top of the stove.

They were dressed in all kinds of clothing, from faded Levis to buckskin shirts. One thing, however, they had in common. Every face in the room was stamped with grim determination.

"H'are you, men," greeted Sloan, sweeping his calm gray eyes over the assemblage.

Jim Hardin hastily scraped back his chair, stood up. "Boys," he said proudly, "this here's Wess Sloan an' his pard, Salt Peters."

An instant of silence followed the introduction. Men looked eagerly at the famous gun fighter, eyes wide with admiration and wonder. Then came a muttered chorus of "Howdy, Sloan," "Howdy, Peters," "Glad to meetcha, men."

In the rough greetings Sloan detected only friendliness. Though he knew these hard-working ranchers regarded him as an outlaw, had no doubt coupled his name with many a crime of which he was innocent,

yet he felt their eagerness to enlist his mighty six-guns on their side.

"Salt Peters, hunh?" grunted a little old fellow with a face as weatherbeaten as a prairie schooner. "How come?"

Sloan laughed. "He's sorta salty, when he gets on the prod."

"Where's Andrews at?" Hardin inquired of Sloan. "You said you was goin' over to the Box B. Didn't Andrews come along with you?"

"He'll be along later, maybe," Sloan explained soberly. "Had a little bruise on his face that needed tendin' to."

HARDIN stared, glanced at Salt's too serious countenance, then nodded heavily. "All right, men," he said, turning to face the motley assemblage. "We're all here together. What you got to say?"

A short-legged, thick-shouldered, gimlet-eyed man, with a face as bristly and uncompromising as a chestnut burr, shifted his quid of Star Navy with a deft twist of the tongue. He looked at the vest pocket edition of himself, evidently his son, standing beside his chair, then spat noisily into the open stove.

"Ed Williams," said Hardin in his role of chairman. "Spit 'er out, Williams."

"I was just thinkin'," Williams' deep rumble sounded like a bumble bee in a jug. "Afore we starts talkin' about havin' a showdown with Sam Rock, maybe we better find out who's workin' for him, an' who ain't."

Instantly a wave of growls, mutterings, hurried whispers filled the room. A tall, spare, red-whiskered man leaped to his feet, hand on the butt of his six-shooter.

"That's jest what I say, Williams!" he said in tones biting with distrust and hatred. "Tell these here men how come yore range is fuller o' cows now than it ever was!"

"That's a black lie, Randall, you rustlin' coyote!" Face blood-red beneath its bristly beard, Ed Williams charged toward the lanky Randall with a bellow like a mad bull. His son followed. Every man in the room was on his feet in an instant, surging back toward the walls, eyes fixed suspiciously on his neighbor, hand hovering near holster. Quickly they separated into two distinct groups.

"Here! Here!" shouted Jim Hardin, waving his short arms.

But it was Sloan's wide shoulders that ploughed through the sea of angry ranchers, his fist that sent Ed Williams staggering back. The very presence of the famous fighter seemed to dominate the scene. The mutterings ceased as abruptly as they began.

"This ain't my fight, men," Sloan told them. "If you want to kill each other to make it a little easier for Rock to own this valley, it's none of my business, I reckon. I just ask the question: Why don't you count heads to see who wants to fight Rock, an' who don't?"

"That's talkin' sense," Hardin boomed. "Either you men quit fightin' each other, or let's call the meetin' off, an' let Rock have Rainbow Valley."

THE two factions eyed each other in silence, then Ed Williams rumbled, "I reckon me an' Jake ain't backward none 'bout fightin' Rock. That right, Jake?"

The boy nodded, his eyes opened very wide.

"I been ready to fight him fer six months," declared Randall, not to be outdone by his old enemy. "Pervided we got a good leader."

Williams slanted a meaning look at the rangy rancher. "If you mean me, Randall, I ain't hankerin' none fer the job—long as you don't have it."

"For cripes sake, Ed, button up

yore lip!" Hardin cut in. "Seein' you all can't agree none on a leader, how 'bout Sloan?"

The hard-bitten ranchers looked at one another in uncertainty. Fighting fool though Wess Sloan was known to be, after all, he was a stranger. And these men who lived close to the raw edges of life, who had worked long and hard for what little they owned, had learned from bitter experience that strangers were not to be trusted.

WHILE they were conferring among themselves, the door opened and the Box B foreman came into the meeting room.

"Howdy, Andrews," said Hardin. "We're just gettin' ready to 'p'int Sloan cap'n. Whatcha say?"

The yellow eyes that Andrews bent on Sloan were filled with undying hate. A purple bruise above his cheek bone, about the size of a half dollar—or of Sloan's knuckles—made his sallow face appear even more bloodless. A nasty snarl twisted his thin lips.

"Thet's fine!" sneered Andrews. "Pickin' Rock's hired killer to lead the fight agin Rock. Shore, thet's fine, wonderful!"

Silence gripped the room; boot soles shuffled uneasily. Somebody muttered something to his neighbor. The neighbor wagged his head.

"Don't pay no 'tention to him, men," Hardin growled angrily. "Maybe Andrews has got his own axe to grind. Sloan's throwin' in with us, an' if we have any sense we'll be mighty glad to have him."

Andrews laughed harshly. "I see he's pulled the wool over your eyes all right, Hardin. Sloan's double-crossin' you, I tell you."

Sloan pushed his way toward Andrews. "Say that again."

Before Sloan's slitted gaze, the Box B foreman dropped back a step. But the hatred he held for Sloan and a sly confidence that lay behind his muddy eyes, drove him on.

"You're right, I'll say it again," he shouted. "You're a Rock gunman, hired to drive all the little ranchers outa this valley—an' you know it!"

Sloan took a backward step, hands at his sides. "I'm waitin' for you to draw, you stinkin' polecat."

Every man in the room instantly recognized in Sloan's low, unfeeling tone, in the slight crouch of his shoulders and the delicate poise of his hands, the unmistakable presence of a gun fighter. They leaned forward tensely, holding their breath, eyes fixed on Sloan's strangely mismatched hands.

"I'm waitin'," Sloan purred again.

The door opened. There stood Sheriff Newlon, his gun pointed at Sloan's head. Behind Newlon crouched Drag Durkin, a gun gripped in each white hand. Other Rock gunmen appeared in the doorway that opened onto the kitchen, and at the windows.

"Hands up, Sloan!" ordered Sheriff Newlon, ineffectually masking his fear behind a loud voice. "You're under arrest for the murder of Dick Calabrese."

SALT PETERS' angry oath shattered the tense silence that followed the lawman's speech. Menacingly he thrust his face close to that of the smirking foreman. "Damn you, Andrews. You done this."

"An' what ef I did?" boasted Andrews, turning to the ranchers. "You fools didn't have sense enough to see you was puttin' yoreselves right into Rock's hands. Shore, I had him arrested. He'll swing, too."

Sloan's hands rose slowly. This was no time for a showdown. Any attempt to throw lead now would only result in a slaughter of the ranchers. He said softly to Andrews: "You're payin' for this."

Andrews laughed loudly. "I ain't

scairt of ha'nts," he bragged. But his face became sober when he saw the looks of black anger directed at him by Hardin, Ed Williams, and most of the others.

Drag Durkin edged into the room. He took Sloan's gun, stepped back beside the sheriff. An undefinable chill rippled up Sloan's spine when the gunman touched his holster. He was going to kill Drag Durkin, some day.

"All right, Sloan," said Newlon, taking from his coat pocket a pair of handcuffs.

"Put them things back!" growled Salt Peters. "Gawd! What do you think Wess Sloan is—a Mex or a hoss thief? If he gives you his word he'll go along peaceable, that's all you need. Put them handcuffs back in yer pocket."

"Like hell I will!" snarled Newlon. "An' if you ain't careful, I'll cuff you, too."

SLOAN stretched out his wrists to the waiting steel bands. "That's all right, Salt," he said quietly. "Our turn's comin'."

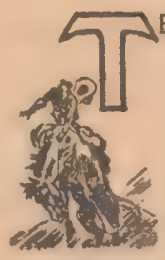
"Yeah," jeered Andrews, "at the end of a rope."

"'Nother thing," said Newlon, facing the grim-visaged ranchers. "You men can all be arrested for incitin' trouble. If you know what's good for you, you better get outa here in a hurry an' go home. I'm comin' back by here in an hour. If you ain't gone by then, I'm goin' to slap every last one of you where Sloan's goin'—in jail."

It hurt Sloan that, of all the ranchers, only Jim Hardin, Ed Williams, and Randall dared even to mutter against Sampson Rock's lawman. With such men as these, he had to fight Rock and save Judy Blake's ranch—if he were lucky enough to cheat the noose that Andrews had boasted was already in waiting for him.

CHAPTER VIII

Unstretched Hemp



THROUGH the stout iron bars of his second-story cell window, Sloan looked grimly down on the main street of Cimarron. News of his arrest had traveled fast. Horses lined hitchrails on both sides of the street. Board sidewalks were jammed with crowds of silent, solemn, armed men. Rock men. Hanging timidly to the edges of the mob were a handful of scared-looking ranchers, sheepmen, nesters. Men would ride far to see Wess Sloan, even at the end of a rope.

He could see a steady stream of men passing in and out of the big Sixty-six saloon, Sampson Rock's headquarters. The drinks were all on the house today, so the Mexican jailer had told Sloan. Rock was celebrating. Rainbow Valley, and the fortune in rights-of-way for the coming railroad, were now in his hand. He could well afford to serve free drinks to any and all.

From the courtyard back of the thick-walled adobe jail came a steady hammering. Sloan's lips drew to a thin line. They were building a gallows. Too shrewd a showman, Rock, to hang the famous Wess Sloan from a cottonwood tree. He was going to make an event of it, give Cimarron such a hanging as men would talk about for many a day.

Sloan turned from the narrow window, sank down heavily on the rickety iron cot. His thoughts were black as the shadows out there in the corridor. To try him and convict him of the murder of Calabrese had taken less than an hour. The judge had sentenced him to be hanged tomorrow morning. But Sloan was thinking not so much of himself as of the many things there were yet to do.

Like a caged lion he paced his nar-

row cell. In the agony that poisoned his mind, he caught hold of the window bars, shook them until his arms all but leaped from their sockets. The guard beneath the window looked up, grinned.

"You'll be shakin' wuss'n that in the mornin'," he jibed.

Sloan looked across the flat mud roofs of the town to the crimsoned eastern sky. The sun was going down, the last sun he was likely ever to see. Then, athwart a burned-out patch of grass beyond the jail, he saw a dark, thin shadow.

IN the shape of an inverted L, it lay across the grass, stark and black, as though it were the scar of a red-hot iron. Inexpressibly sinister, this shadow. Sloan turned cold. It was the shadow cast by the completed gallows.

He sank back on the iron cot. Wearily the long minutes dragged by. A hundred wild plans of escape were born in his tortured brain, each leaving him more hopeless than the last. There was a bare possibility that Salt Peters would try to rescue him, or Jim Hardin. Sloan hoped they would not attempt it. For Rock had guards stationed everywhere about the jail.

Somewhere out in the night a clock was striking eleven, before Sloan at last hit on a plan.

Leaping up from the cot, he shook the cell door until its metallic rattle reverberated throughout the jail, the noise arousing venomous curses from the other prisoners. As he shook, he yelled full-lunged:

"Agua — agua fria! Water — cold water! *Por Dios, agua fria!"*

The Mexican jailer came shuffling up the corridor, cursing sleepily, the yellow beams from his lantern painting weird pictures on the rough plastered walls. As the Mexican drew near, Sloan threw himself face-down on the stone floor, as if he had fainted. His right hand lay close to the opening beneath the door.

Mumbling curses, the jailer shoved a tin cup of water under the grating. With the incredible speed which was the secret of his six-gun prowess, Sloan's hand darted out, seized the jailer's wrist. He jerked back with such force that the man's sandaled feet shot from under him. Scarcely had he hit the floor when Sloan, pulling him closer, snatched the gun stuck in the jailer's sash.

"Unlock this door!" he gritted. *"Muy pronto!"*

The jailer's lips moved spasmodically, but from them came no sound. Fear paralyzed him. Sloan bored the gun barrel into his ribs. "Spik—unlock me!"

Muttering a prayer, the Mexican rose slowly to his feet. From the bunch of keys that hung from his waist he fumblingly selected one. But his hands trembled so violently that he was unable to fit the key into the lock. In a sudden panic of fear he kicked over the lantern and darted down the corridor—both in the same swift movement.

SLOAN yelled at him to halt, then shot into the darkness. The deafening blast choked the corridor with booming echoes that he thought would never end. Shouts and screams of other prisoners added to the chaos. It seemed hours before Sloan's straining ears caught a faint moan. It was the jailer. Wounded, but how badly?

"I see you," Sloan called guardedly. "Got my gun right on you. Unlock this door quick, or I'm shootin'. I can see in the dark!"

While he waited in breathless suspense, Sloan heard loud shouts outside the jail, the pad of hurrying feet—

"But, *Señor* Essloan," came a gasping whine. "My leg, she broke. I no can walk."

"You lie, Spik. Didn't I tell you

I can see in the dark? I see you movin' yore leg. Open this door!"

A chorus of shouts—savage, vengeful—burst across the night. Rock's wolf pack was coming, hell-bent.

"All right," said Sloan. "I'm shootin'. *Uno*—"

"No, no, *señor*—no keel me! I try!"

"Hurry up!"

GROANING with pain, the jailer dragged himself to the cell door, pulled himself up by its bars. Urged by the pressure of the gun barrel in his stomach, he unlocked the door with surprising speed.

Sloan sprang into the corridor, flattened himself against the wall as a guard rushed past. The barrel of his gun arced swiftly up and down. Cracked on the skull, the guard slumped to the floor. Sloan snatched up his rifle and sped down the corridor.

He ducked into the jail office as five or six men rushed past. Then he dived out the front door. Rounding a corner of the jail, he ran head-on into a man. A pitiful, terror-stricken squeal held his trigger finger. The man dropped to his knees, lifted pleading arms, lips moving soundlessly. It was Sheriff Newlon.

"You dirty little rat!" spat Sloan. "You ain't worth a bullet. But if you let on you saw me, I'm comin' back an' kill you. Savvy?"

"I—I won't tell, Sloan," whimpered Newlon.

"You better not."

Sloan angled across the clearing in front of the jail, jumped a little acequia, and found himself in an alley. He ran on toward the livery stable where he knew Blue would be kept. More than once he crouched in the shadow of a wall or tree as silent men rushed past. The streets were filled with men, all headed toward the jail. A church bell started ringing, another chimed in. Wess Sloan had broken jail; the man-hunt was on!

Yet it was significant that the hunters traveled not singly, but in packs. Gun slingers though they were, and full of free whisky, scarcely a man among them would care to come face to face with Sloan, alone.

Sloan came finally to the back of the livery stable, but found the door locked. Hugging the shadows, he edged into the lighted street, swooped upon two men conversing excitedly in the wide doorway. At sight of him, both men seemed to turn to stone. Sloan forced them into the stable.

"Quick. Saddle my hoss."

"Yuh — yuh — yuh bet, Mister Sloan!" gasped one of the stablemen. The other ran ahead of him into the stall. In no relay race was a horse ever saddled with such speed. At Sloan's crisp order they swung open the back door, and he thundered into the night, bound for Jim Hardin's house.

But he suddenly changed his mind. Streaking across a vacant lot, he looked back toward the Sixty-six saloon. Going through the door, arm in arm, were Sampson Rock and Andrews. Sloan drew rein.

"I wonder if that skunk is toadyin' to Rock 'cause he hates me," he thought, "or if he's a Rock spy. I'm goin' to find out."

CHAPTER IX

The Double-Cross

DOUBLING back at a slow trot, Sloan wormed his way cautiously through deserted back streets until he came to the adobe-walled corral behind the Sixty-six. Dismounting, he noiselessly let down the bars and led Blue inside. He hitched the roan in one of the brush-roofed stalls that lined

one entire side of the high-fenced corral.

Sloan crouched toward the back of the saloon. Light glimmered in the grimy window of the room where Sampson Rock presided over his court of evil. Soundlessly, Sloan crept to the window, pressed an ear to the crack between frame and plaster wall.

Several men were in there, talking. But of what they were saying Sloan could distinguish nothing except Rock's bitter curses.

HE tried the door, very softly. It swung inward, with a barely audible screech of hinge. He closed the door, flattened himself against the wall, thankful for the darkness that gloomed this end of the hall. He edged closer to Rock's door.

"You say Sloan is gonna lead the ranchers agin us tomorrer night?" boomed Rock's voice, cocksure, domineering, filled with the great power he wielded.

"That's right, tomorrer night," came Andrews' eager answer. "I got it from a feller that works for Ed Williams. That's how come Sloan was so hell-bent to break jail."

Rock let loose a torrent of abuse and profanity. "Skeered of his shadder, every sniveling one of you, 'cept Durkin there."

"I'm killin' Sloan," said Drag Durkin, entirely without feeling.

"You'll have your chance tomorrer night," snapped Rock.

There was a pause, then Andrews said: "But the gal. You said—"

"I said Durkin gets her. But there'll be a dozen ranches round here needin' a foreman, after tomorrer night. I'll take care of you, Andrews."

Andrews' whining complaint brought forth more cursing from Rock. Sloan had heard enough. He edged away, slipped through the back door. He froze, as a gun barrel was rammed into the pit of his stomach.

"Reach!" growled a voice.

As Sloan's hands rose quickly, he looked hard at the blurred, shadowy man crouched in front of him, but failed to recognize him. "What's the idea, fella?" Sloan said in a low voice. "What you mean, throwin' a gun on one of Rock's men?"

"Rock man, hell!" grunted the fellow. "I don't know yer brand, but you ain't in Sam Rock's corral. I seen you when you sneaked in, an' I been watchin' you, savvy?" He shoved the muzzle an inch into Sloan's stomach. "Back up, through that door. An' if you drop yer hands, you're dead."

Desperate as was Sloan's predicament, he was glad of one thing. This *hombre* had not recognized him. Had the fellow known that the man at the end of his gun was Wess Sloan, he would have pulled trigger long ago.

Sloan was half through the door, backing in. Just behind him, in Rock's private room, boots were moving toward the door. Up in front, the saloon was filled with Rock gunmen.

WITH the blind courage born of utter despair, he caught his left elbow and knee behind the heavy slabbed door. Pushing it from him with all his might, in the same instant he gave his body a lightning sidewise twist. He scarcely felt the searing rake of the bullet across his side. Only a split-instant behind the man's shot, Sloan's gun thundered. The man collapsed to the floor in a sodden, boneless heap.

Sloan wheeled, faced the door to Rock's room, as loud shouts rang out from within. The room suddenly became dark. From the front of the saloon came the roar of many voices; along the passageway the thump of hurrying feet. Beyond the walls of

the corral a man cried out in unintelligible warning.

"Better rustle," Sloan told himself. "Stirred up a hornet's nest."

Springing over the man sprawled dead in the doorway, he ran swiftly to where he had left Blue. The stall was empty. Thinking that he might be mistaken, Sloan searched other stalls. But the horse was gone.

He whistled the call to which Blue always answered. From somewhere out there in the darkness, Blue whinnied. The man who had watched Sloan come into the corral had no doubt moved the horse. Sloan whistled again. But the dark wave of humanity belching through the doorway drowned the answering nicker. Hammer thumbed back, Sloan wove into the twisty blackness, searching for his horse.

"Get him, men!" stormed Sam Rock. "Don't let him get away!"

"Kill Sloan!" That was Andrews.

Now an ugly, concerted roar, like that of suddenly unleashed beasts, filled the night. Get Sloan! Kill Sloan! How the wolf pack bayed in triumph! At last the mighty Wess Sloan was trapped, run into a corner. He couldn't get away this time.

COOLLY, Sloan threaded the velvety darkness. Blue could not be very far away. The manhunters spilled over the corral in waves. One passed within a few feet of Sloan, but he held his hand.

"Get him, men!" Rock kept booming. "Don't you let that devil get away!"

"There he goes!" cried a man. "Behind that there shed."

Sloan collided heavily with a man coming from the opposite direction. A startled oath preceded by a fraction of a heartbeat two orange-yellow spurts.

"Git him, Dell?"

But Dell was doing his answering in another world.

Sloan dived into the shed. He fell against a horse. The horse nickered softly. "Blue, we gotta go!" muttered Sloan. Already he had unhitched the roan and was in the saddle. Two shadowy figures bulked in the opening, weird blue lights gleaming from their naked guns.

"Go, Blue!"

LIKE a rocket, the big roan shot from the shed. His outflung hoofs slammed one of the men crazily sidewise. Even as the other pulled trigger, Sloan's gun barrel arced against his skull.

As he raced across the corral, Sloan did not hear the cries of men, the barking of guns; he did not see the vivid gashes of flame stabbing the darkness. Nor did he feel the sting of a bullet across his arm. Flat on Blue's outstretched neck, he raced toward the corral wall.

He was almost upon the adobe wall. It was five feet high. Could Blue ever jump that high wall, and in the dark? The stab of Sloan's rowels, the tug of his reins, lifted the horse into the air.

"Over, Blue!"

The great horse rose higher and higher. Sloan felt as if he were flying. Then the descent—swift, dizzy. But Blue's hind feet failed to clear the wall. In a tangled heap, horse and rider crashed on the other side. A savage cheer burst from the Rock men.

But almost immediately Blue was on his feet, racing away, empty stirrups flapping. Sloan made a desperate dive for the saddle horn, hooked it with one hand, hung on for a quarter-mile before he found the stirrups.

For upwards of two hours he lay in a draw while Rock's hellions scoured the sage flats for him. When the last hoofbeat had died away, he rode on toward Jim Hardin's. The stars had gone, and a long bar of

rose lay low against the eastern horizon, when Sloan slid wearily from the saddle in front of Hardin's ranch house. Hardin and Salt Peters met him at the door.

"Wess!" Peters exclaimed joyously. "You got out! We was figgerin' on shootin' you outa that jail in the mornin', Hardin an' me was. Gosh, you're bloody as a hawg! You musta—"

"I'm all right," Sloan cut in hurriedly. "Listen. Andrews has double-crossed us. Heard him tellin' Rock we was attackin' tonight. We got to hit 'em before then, soon as we can get our men together.

"Hear, Hardin? Right now's the time to call for a showdown. Come on, let's round up them ranchers."

Hardin grinned. He pulled a bottle of whisky from his hip pocket, uncorked it, held it up. "Here's luck, Sloan."

"It ain't luck we need," said Sloan, reaching for the bottle. "It's straight shootin', an' plenty of it."

CHAPTER X

Guns of Vengeance

AN eagle, soaring above the sleepy little cowtown of Cimarron, sprawled peacefully in the hot, sultry rays of the noonday sun, might have seen a wagonload of hay crawl up the wide, deserted street. The wagon stopped in front of a vacant two-story store building which faced the Sixty-six saloon, on the opposite side of the street.

The eagle might have observed half a dozen men, armed with rifles, crawl from beneath the hay and vanish into the empty store. On all sides of the town the eagle could have seen sober-visaged, well-armed men caching horses in lonely draws and dense clumps of piñon trees, and begin converging cautiously on the main street.

Then, if the eagle lingered, he could have seen the wagon team start off down the street, and a man coming toward it from the saloon. After a moment a round, cottony puff of smoke floated above the man in the driver's seat, another above the man on foot. Beneath the cloud of dust kicked up by the runaway team, two dark objects lay motionless in the street.

AT that point, the eagle, if he were a wise bird, would have hightailed it for his eerie on some lone mountain crag, where his safety could be menaced only by such things as lions and hundred-miles-an-hour gales. For hell had broken wide open in the little cowtown of Cimarron.

As if by magic, the street swarmed with Rock men. They belched out of a dozen doorways at once, to be met by the embattled ranchers rushing in from outlying gulches. In a deafening thunder of gunfire, the two factions met. Firing from doorway and window, from behind hitchrack post and waterbarrel, Sam Rock's gunnies and the Rainbow Valley ranchers led by Wess Sloan had at last met for a showdown.

Step by bitter step, Rock's men were beaten back. Beneath the deadly hail of lead from the upper windows of the vacant building, they broke and ran headlong into the Sixty-six saloon.

"After 'em, men!" Sloan shouted.

"I'm right behind you, Wess!" yelled Salt Peters, loading his gun as he ran.

From behind a water barrel, big Ed Williams slammed a slug from his old buffalo gun at a head that appeared for an instant in the door of the barber shop.

"Clean 'em up, boys!" he shouted. "Every son of 'em! Come on, Randall!"

"I'm with you, Ed, dang yore ornery hide!"

Like a cannonball Sloan went through the saloon door, Peters close behind him. Even as he sent a bullet crashing between the eyes of the man who faced him, Sloan saw that the gunmen were badly disorganized. Rock was nowhere to be seen.

KNEE to knee, Sloan and Peters shot their way into the very maw of the raw hell that rocked the saloon from floor to ceiling. The ranchers had spread out along the wall, their combined fire raking the enemy from the side.

Before Sloan's lethal blasts and under the withering onslaught of the fighting farmers, Rock's men gave ground swiftly. A big fellow, down but still shooting, rammed his gun muzzle into Salt's stomach. Sloan knocked in his skull. Sloan spun round, just in time to see the flat-faced barkeep aiming a scattergun at his head. The aproned gent pulled trigger, but it was after Sloan's bullet was in his heart. The charge of buckshot tore into the ceiling.

Out of the smoke, Andrews' sallow, hate-filled face suddenly appeared before him. Almost at the same instant, the guns of both men went up. Andrews' bullet clipped Sloan's ear, but Sloan's firing pin clicked on empty chambers.

Andrews, snarling like a wolf, thumbed back his hammer for the kill. A black hole leaped between Andrews' eyes; he fell in a heap. Swede, who had shot the foreman, crouched for another shot.

"Good work, Swede!" encouraged Sloan, reloading with lightning-like speed. He had scarcely uttered the words when Swede doubled in the middle, hitting the floor on his astonished face.

Now the gunmen were stampeding for the back door, in their panic falling all over one another. Sloan's slitted eyes bored into the powder fog over smoking muzzles. He knew that Jim Hardin and his two Texas cowboys were waiting at the back door.

A thunderous volley from behind deafened him. As Sloan ducked and pivoted in the same panther-quick movement, he saw Ed Williams pitch on his face, saw two more ranchers break at the knees. Sam Rock stood in the door. Sam Rock, with the curse of hell on his face.

Behind him swarmed ten or twelve men. Even in the murk, Sloan caught a glimpse of the cold, cruel face of the killer, Drag Durkin. And something else he saw. Durkin's hat was banded with silver conchas!

"Down, men!" Sloan shouted. "On the floor!"

Another murderous blast from Rock and his men shook the room. Sloan swore softly as he slipped shells into empty chambers. Before him towered the mighty bulk of Sampson Rock. In the same split-instant, Rock saw him. A short jet of orange-red spat from Sloan's gun. Rock, shot in the middle of the forehead, crashed to the floor like a felled ox.

A WILD cheer went up from the ranchers. The death of their hated powerful enemy set them crazy. Nothing could stop them now. As one man, they sprang upon the gunmen, an avenging wave of outraged humanity roused past the killing pitch. More than one widow was made in the next ten seconds. But the battle was won.

In the terrible mangle of steel and lead and straining flesh, Sloan suddenly found himself face to face with Drag Durkin. A great joy burst in his heart. Faster than even he could believe, his gun was up. But an awful question leaped into his eyes as Durkin's powder flashed in

his face and Durkin's bullet slammed him backward against the wall.

He pitched senselessly into the black chasm that yawned before him—

A CHOKING draft of forty rod whisky snapped Sloan's eyes open. He tried to sit up, but fell back from the sharp pain that stabbed him in the shoulder.

"Take her easy, Wess," came Salt Peters' cool, easy drawl. "You gota hole in yore shoulder big enough for a steer to step in. I got her sorta plugged up till the doc gets here. Take her easy, the fight's over."

Only one thought burned in Sloan's brain. "Durkin—beat me—to the draw!" he muttered brokenly.

Salt Peters laughed. "So, that's what's worryin' you. Well, I ain't so shore he beat you. Yore gun had a snapped cartridge under the plunger."

A wave of relief passed over the gun fighter, to be followed instantly by doubt, uncertainty, vague unrest. *Had* Durkin beaten him to the draw? Had he at last met a faster man than himself? Gored with the thought that Drag Durkin had downed him, he pulled himself up with lip-whitening effort.

Through eyes seared with agony, he saw Jim Hardin and perhaps a dozen ranchers herding a group of captured gunmen toward the jail. The white, fat, terror-stricken face of Sheriff Newlon was among the remnants of Rock's gang.

"I don't see Durkin," Sloan muttered thickly. "Where's Durkin gone?"

"He was the only one that got away," Peters explained sorrowfully. "Slippery as an eel, that feller. While Randall was takin' his gun, he whups a hideout .38 from somewhere an' shoots Randall dead. Then, with the whole crowd of us pourin' lead at him, he jumps on his hoss an' gets away."

Sloan's drawn face went a shade paler. "Which way did he go?"

Peters extended an arm up the dusty street. Anxiously he looked at Sloan. "Wess, what's the matter?"

Sloan got to his feet, leaning against the wall for support. "Get Blue—quick."

Peters stared at him. "But, man, you can't trail Durkin. You're bad hurt."

"Get Blue, like I told you. Don't you know Durkin beat me to the draw?"

Knowing that argument was useless, Peters went slowly away. He came back, leading Blue, as well as his own horse. Gently he helped Sloan into the saddle, put foot in his own stirrups.

Sloan shook his head. "You ain't goin', Salt. This is my fight. Between me an' Durkin. So long." He swung into the street at a stiff lope.

For once in his life, Salt Peters was worried over Sloan's being able to take care of himself. He did not move out of his tracks until Sloan was lost against the blue haze of the distant mountains. He turned away then, sadly shaking his head.

"Pore ol' Wess," he muttered. "He's gone to get hisn. 'Cause Durkin beat him to the draw!"

CHAPTER XI

Sundown

HOLDING grimly to the saddle, Sloan fogged toward the Box B. He felt certain that Drag Durkin had gone to claim the girl that Rock had promised him—and Judy was doubtless all alone.

In front of the ranch house, he slid from his heaving horse, trailed his spurs swiftly across the deep, vine-shadowed gallery. Loudly he

knocked, but no one answered. Yes, there was a faint groan.

Sloan pushed open the door. He stopped short. The room looked like a cyclone had struck it. Tables overturned, chairs broken, rugs kicked into shapeless heaps, splotches of blood on the floor—a terrible fight had taken place here. Cold fear gripped Sloan.

"Judy!" he called.

Mockingly, the echoes of his distraught voice shuttled around the disordered room. Then he again heard the groan. It seemed to come from the kitchen. He plunged across the room into the kitchen.

On the floor, beneath the water bucket he had tried so desperately to reach, lay Slim. With a quick glance at the gray face, the blood-soaked shirt bosom, Sloan dropped down beside him, lifted his head.

"Slim!" he implored. "Where's Durkin? Where's Judy?"

The cowboy's feverish brown eyes regarded him waveringly. His swollen lips moved. "Water," he mumbled thickly.

Sloan gave him water. "Slim, what happened?"

"Drag—he got her."

"Which way did he go?"

Slim sank back with a gentle sigh, as of a tired child going to sleep. Sloan shook him.

"Which way did he go, man?"

BENDING close to Slim's set lips, Sloan heard a step in the next room. On his knees, he whirled from the hips, gun up.

"Hold 'er, Wess." It was Salt Peters.

"I told you not to foller me," Sloan said angrily.

Salt grinned foolishly. "Well, I kinda thought—"

"All right. Since you're here, look after this kid. He's bad hurt. Get a doctor soon as you can. I'm goin' now—to finish my fight."

Salt held out his hand. But instead of saying the thing that was in his heart, he said lightly: "As I rid up, I seen where a hoss, packin' double, had headed towards the Lonesomes."

"That's what I figgered," said Sloan, releasing Salt's hand and sloping through the door.

WITH the doggedness of death itself, he clung to Durkin's trail. The saga flats passed behind him, the rounded, juniper-studded foothills, and he entered the Lonesome Mountains. Utterly forlorn seemed the wilderness of naked crag and towering battlements that stretched before him into the sky.

In the dark, wind-plowed canyons, hidden caverns, and small parks tucked away in the very bowels of the tumbled peaks, Durkin could find a hundred places to hide.

Sloan looked up at the blood-red sun, balanced on a distant spur. It was scarcely an hour from its setting. There was in his gray eyes an expression many men had seen, but of which none had ever lived to tell. He spurred the big roan into a reckless lope.

"Hate to do it, Blue," he told the horse softly. "But we got to overtake Durkin before the sun goes down. You hear, Blue? Before the sun goes down!"

Soon the grisly jaws of a mighty, black-shadowed canyon closed about him. Hollowly the hoofbeats of the horse rang out on the stone floor. Over the leaning rimrocks that towered so high above him, the sky showed as only a narrow, ragged ribbon.

More than once he had to scale dangerous piles of loose boulders that clogged the gorge, and swim Blue through black pools of icy water. Judging from the freshness of the water splashes made by the other horse, he was certain that he

was gaining on Durkin. Still, the killer kept out of sight, and it was growing ever darker.

Winding through a seemingly endless succession of gorge and chasm, Sloan came at length to the edge of a heavily timbered slope. Abruptly the slope dropped to a small oval meadow, surrounded by a dense growth of pines and spruce. At the edge of the evergreens was a little log cabin, probably the relic of some prospector.

OVER this secluded paradise, the setting sun spread a gauze of gold and lavender, enfolding the cabin, the still meadow, the stately spires of the evergreens with infinite peace.

"What a hole-up," Sloan murmured, in his voice all the deep love of nature that life in the wide open spaces had instilled there. But he did not see Durkin. Could he have missed the trail? Sloan did not think so.

Carefully he started down the declivity, keeping out of sight of the cabin as much as possible. When he was about a third of the way down, he saw Durkin, the girl in front of him, ride out of a clump of cedars at the foot of the cliff and go toward the cabin.

Sloan turned suddenly cold. Like hammers his blood beat at his temples. Fearful that Blue might start a rock rolling, he waited until the killer was almost to the cabin. Then he went swiftly down.

Hitching Blue in a cedar grove, he carefully examined both of his guns. He unbreeched them, squinted through the barrels, worked the glass-smooth hammers back and forth. With the first touch of his fingers on the cedar butts of his gun, a subtle change came over Sloan.

Now, as he slipped into a half-crouch, his muscles became rigid, his face as stone. From boot sole to hat crown, he was less man than fighting machine. His right shoulder dipped, down flashed his hand in that peculiar underhand motion that defied sight, baffled imitation, doomed the man who faced him. Three times Sloan made his famous draw there in the thicket.

"Maybe Durkin will beat me to the draw again," he said to himself as he slid the six-shooter back into its worn, oak-tanned holster thonged low on his thigh. "He's downed ten men in fair fight, they say. But I'm killin' him, even if his first shot drills me through the heart."

With slow, confident tread he strode through the knee-high grass toward the cabin. His eyes were riveted on the door. His hands swung loosely at his sides. He had advanced to within fifty feet of the cabin when the door opened. In the square of blackness stood Drag Durkin.

Sloan stopped. Motionless he stood, eyes drawn to tiny points.

DRAG DURKIN, seeming to accept the challenge of Wess Sloan as a thing he had always known would come to pass, drew the door shut. Gaze fixed on Sloan, he walked a dozen paces from the cabin, stopped. Less than forty feet separated the fighters.

"I'm waitin' for you to draw," Drag Durkin called insolently.

"I never draw first," Sloan answered. In spite of himself, the feeling that he was facing a man faster with a gun than himself gnawed at Sloan's vitals.

Durkin had beat him to the first shot in the Sixty-six. The thought weighed on Sloan like a pall. He knew that Durkin's being a Rock man did not matter. Nothing mattered except that Durkin challenged his supremacy as a gun fighter.

Seeming to divine each other's thoughts with hair-trigger precision, as one man both great fighters went

for their guns; Sloan with his fatal underhand swoop, Durkin with the draw that had given him his name, an incredibly fast drag of the gun hanging butt-forward on his left thigh.

Two shots, so close together that they might have been one, shattered the twilight stillness of the sylvan meadow, thundered and rumbled up the flanks of the surrounding cliffs, until their echoes were lost among the rimrocks. Sloan was whirled completely around by the terrific impact of Durkin's bullet tearing through his right arm. He staggered drunkenly, went blind. Somehow, he reached the man lying in the gass.

"Got him," muttered Sloan. "Plumb center."

He picked up Durkin's hat. With the silver conchas that banded the hat, he compared the concha he carried in his pocket. They matched. Undoubtedly he had killed Lin Blake's murderer.

He stumbled toward the cabin, pushed open the door.

"Judy," he called.

"Wess, did you—did you—"

"Yes, Judy. Where are you? It's so dark in here I can't see."

"I'm tied up, here on the bunk."

Sloan struck a match, cut the rope from her wrists and ankles.

"Your arm!" exclaimed Judy. "It's broken, Wess."

Sloan drew her close to him. "But I can make good use of the other one, Judy," he told her softly.

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The Exciting, Action-Packed True-Life Picture Story of a Famous Bank Robber, Train Robber, Guerilla, and Desperate Gun Fighter of the West

Jesse James, the Wild West's greatest outlaw, was the son of a minister. He was born in 1845, at Clay County, Mo. He and his brother Frank are cruel youths, torturing boys and animals. Both are well-trained in the use of guns. They take delight in whipping a weaker companion.

At 17, Jesse, along with his brother Frank, joins a wild lawless gang of guerillas led by Charles William Quantrell, who afflicts the borders of Kansas and Missouri. The gruesome initiation, conducted by masked men, pointing sharp swords at a newly sworn in guerilla, is shown above.

Fierce passions are roused by the conflict between North and South—old friends become enemies. The guerillas hate the sight of blue uniforms worn by Federals who try to curb gangs. Frank and Jesse join raids on Federals, revelling in bloodshed.

The James brothers each command a squadron of 25 of Quantrell's men. Quantrell is finally killed, in a raid in which Jesse is wounded. At the close of the war, as order is slowly restored throughout th nation, Jesse is home recuperating from his injury.

"You horsethief!" a stranger screams at Frank James, who is recognized at a restaurant near the border. "You ought to be hung!" Frank is surrounded by foes, but shoots his way out of the jam. With flaming lead he kills four men, and just barely escapes with a bad hip wound.

In 1866, a bank at Liberty, Mo., is robbed. Both James boys are laid up with wounds, but such is their reputation that they are accused. Weak and suffering, Jesse is surrounded by a posse when in a doctor's home. Jesse flings open the door, shoots rapidly. He kills four. The rest scatter.

The brothers are now marked and distrusted. "We might as well rob banks, as long as we get the credit for it," says Jesse, and fireworks start! Frank plans a raid on a bank in Russelville, Ky. Ten men, led by Jesse, get $100,000 in loot and escape with it.

In the Sierra Mountains of California, some gold miners decide to swindle the two "green" Missouri lads at cards. Jesse spots cheating. "So that's the game!" he shouts. Fighting 30 men, Frank and Jesse shoot their way out, leaving 12 dead. [*Turn page*]

With every man's hand against them, Frank and Jesse speed back to Missouri. In Gallatin, Mo., in 1869, five masked men rob a bank, murdering some employes. "We didn't have anything to do with it!" protest the James brothers, but nobody believes them.

1872 finds them in Columbia, Ky., where they hold up a bank. The cashier resists. They kill him, before the eyes of the bank president. Then follow a bank robbery at Corydon, Iowa, and the looting of the cash box at the Kansas City Exposition.

"Robbing banks is tame," says Jesse. "Let's get some gold bullion by holding up trains." They tear up the tracks of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railway at a point about 14 miles east of Council Bluffs, and, in hiding, await developments.

The train is derailed. The engineer is killed and many wounded. Breaking into the express car, the bandits get $25,000 in bullion shipped from California. 'This is worth while!" exclaims Jesse, and shortly after they wreck the St. Louis and Texas express.

As their train robberies grow in number, heavy rewards are offered for their capture. A force of detectives is hired; the U. S. Government joins the trail. John W. Wicher, a Pinkerton man, gets a hot tip—but is warned by his friends to take it easy.

Wicher goes ahead anyway—and is outwitted, severely beaten by the James boys. "Tell us what the police plans are," Jesse demands, but Wicher consistently refuses to talk despite torture. They kill him, and later murder two other detectives.

In 1875, the Jameses are believed to be at their mother's house one night. The detectives decide to strike a telling blow. Tipped off, Frank and Jesse escape unseen. The police set fire to the house and throw grenades at it. A child is killed and the banditts' mother is wounded. Lawmen are blamed.

Frank plans lawless deeds—Jesse does them. Without Jesse, Frank is helpless. When Jesse is shot and killed by Robert Ford—a friend—at the age of 37, Frank's career as an outlaw is over too. Jesse leaves $600 worth of guns, revolvers and bullets—and an unsurpassed record of deviltry!

Another Great True-Life Picture Story in Next Month's Issue

The SHERIFF of

Trouble Rides into Town in the Wake of Five Tough-Looking Hombres on Yellow Horses in this Smashing Yarn of the West

A Complete Novelette

By RAY HUMPHREYS

Author of "Quick Triggers," "The Blue Eyed Kid," etc.

CHAPTER I

Yellow Whirlwind

JOE DALY, the young, red-headed deputy sheriff of Crooked Creek, sensed mystery — and trouble—the instant he saw the swirling cavalcade tearing up Main Street. Five strange men, tough-looking *hombres,* on five yellow horses. Yellow horses, with white manes and tails, beautiful creatures, hardly in keeping with their type of riders.

Not a head turned as the group clattered by the sheriff's office. But Joe Daly's blue eyes narrowed ominously. "Hey, boss!" he called over his shoulder, quietly. "Look!"

"Now what?" demanded old Sheriff Eddie Moore, getting up out of his chair with a rheumatic grunt. "By gosh, it's getting so a person can't ever get a minute's peace—"

A grim smile played across Joe Daly's face.

"Get a minute's eyeful of this!" invited Joe, with a calmness he didn't feel at all. "Quick—"

Sheriff Moore took a look—and whistled. "What is it—a circus?" he asked, incredulously.

"A show of some kind, apparently," answered Joe, in a tone that made the sheriff look up at him quickly.

"Five hard-boiled eggs on five yolk-colored horses. They're all packing plenty artillery, too.

"I'd say, off hand, that we'd have a performance of some sort right soon—probably a holdup, or a shooting fiesta—"

Sheriff Moore sighed, suddenly, in relief.

"They passed the bank corner, anyhow," he said, relaxing.

"Yeah," agreed Joe Daly, smiling. "But the stage company's office—and safe—are still ahead of them, for instance, and—"

SHERIFF MOORE leaped out into the street, thoroughly alarmed.

"Come on, Joe!" he called, excitedly. "I'm thinking your way, this time. Those strangers ain't in here for nothing! We'd better be on the job—a lot on the job—until we find out what they're up to. We'd better keep them in sight—"

But Joe caught his superior's arm quickly.

"Hold on a second, boss!" he implored. "They're dismounting in front of the Aladdin café. Yeah, they're all going in, too—anchoring their horses—they're going in on

Crooked Creek

Malcado, caught full in the chest, fell forward

legitimate business or they'd leave a man outside. We'd better wait—"

But the old sheriff, veteran of many a hard-fought gun battle, was impatient. He shook his shaggy head. "Wait, nothing. We're going on up there!"

So they went. They stopped, however, for a brief moment in front of the café to admire the five yellow horses. They *were* beauties, and as like as five peas in a pod. Intelligent-headed, long-bodied, slim-legged, with luxuriant white manes and tails, they showed evidences of splendid saddle breeding.

THEY also showed evidences of recent hard riding. Joe, his keen eyes observant as ever, saw that the animals bore no brands, which was unusual. But the sheriff, with a muttered command, turned for the café door.

"We'll ask these boys a few questions," he said, meaningly.

The five strangers, lined up along the dingy little lunch counter, turned scowling faces as the officers entered. Their glances were not reassuring at all. But Joe Daly gave the men a smile, just the same. Then he addressed the nearest of the evil-looking quintet.

"We were just admiring them yellow horses you got," explained Joe, glibly. "And we were wondering where they were from?"

"Down Dubois way," said the man addressed, gruffly.

"You boys cowhands?" asked the sheriff, pointedly.

"Yep, and good ones," said the stranger, while his mute companions waited, as if for a signal. "We're heading for the rodeo at Columbine—if you're interested."

The sheriff probably looked his relief. Joe continued to smile. The spokesman for the stranger smiled, too—but it was a cold, calculating smile.

"We aim to show them Columbine rodeo hands what Dubois horses and men can do," said the stranger, lifting his coffee cup. "We're after the money—the prize money—over there, and I'm betting we get it." With that he put the cup to his lips. It was a sign that the conversation was ended. The sheriff, eyes narrowing, turned away. Joe swung after him, leisurely. They nodded to the café man as they passed out.

"Well!" exclaimed the sheriff, on the sidewalk.

"Not so well!" echoed Joe, in a whisper. "I've never lamped five pairs of shrewder, more cunning eyes than them *hombres* have. They remind me of a bunch of wild animals—foxes, maybe. And if they're not lying about the Columbine rodeo, all I can say is—Lord help the rodeo people with those five devils messing in!"

"Me," said the sheriff, "I'm going across to the barber shop and plant there until these birds get out of town. I wouldn't be at all surprised if they tried to hold up the café—"

But Joe Daly shook his red head.

"They're not that crude," he said, with decision. "They're smart *hombres*. They should be made to take out big game licenses; for that's what they're after, I'm figuring, boss—big game!"

"I'm waiting," said Sheriff Moore, "until they blow town!"

BUT the wait wasn't long. The sheriff hadn't been loitering in the barber shop more than five minutes when the strange quintet sauntered out of the café, chewing on toothpicks. They mounted slowly, swung around, and headed down Main Street in a cloud of dust, attracting the attention of everyone on the street.

Two blocks along they broke into a gallop, and a few moments later the yellow whirlwind was well on

the way, along the Columbine trail.

Sheriff Moore, breathing easier, stepped out on the street.

"Good riddance," he began, enthusiastically, but at that second a lathered horseman yanked his panting mount to a skidding halt in front of Daly, who had been standing on the opposite corner. The sheriff, scenting an emergency, ran across the street.

"Old Man Wilmot is dead!" the newcomer, John Wells, was shouting, almost hysterically. "I rode over to his place on a hunch that all wasn't right, and found him on the floor of his cabin, with two bullet holes through the chest, dying. I got hold of him and he blurted out that some men had shot him and robbed him—getting his hoard of around three thousand dollars. He died in my arms. I come riding—"

Joe Daly laid a quieting hand on Wells' knee.

"Old Wilmot didn't recognize the men—or notice the horses, did he?" cried Joe, his eyes flashing.

"No—he said they were strangers," answered Wells, excitedly. "He died before he could say much. But me—I figure it's the Malcado gang again, boys—they must have come back—"

JOE DALY'S eyes were mere slits now as he asked another question, cutting in on something Sheriff Moore was about to say.

"You said, Wells, that you had a hunch—" began Joe.

"Yeah, I had a hunch," explained Wells, swiftly. "About a hour before, five of the meanest looking coyotes this side of hell passed my place, all on yellow horses. I doped them out as plenty bad *hombres*.

"I got to worrying. I thought of Old Hermit Wilmot and got uneasy. So I rode over there and—"

The sheriff swung away with a disgusted whoop.

"The nerve of those devils—and us having them right in our hands. I'm going to get up a posse, Joe!"

Joe nodded. But still he stood by Wells.

"You rode over there, Wells," went on Joe, "and then what—?"

"I seen a girl, in overalls, on a yellow horse!" cried Wells, "One of the same gang, I'll swear—and she waved at me!"

CHAPTER II

The Posse Rides

IT was a grim-faced, heavily-armed little posse that ripped out of Crooked Creek a few minutes later. There had been no time really to organize. The sheriff, shouting the news of Old Man Wilmot's murder, had run a block down Main Street, to his office, where he snatched up his Winchester. The word he passed spread like wildfire.

"Old Wilmot's been killed!" went the cry. "Murdered!"

"Everybody, horses!" came the shout on all sides.

Joe Daly, running to the SeCheverell livery barns, gave the alarm there. The group of hangers-on about the place were hard riding *hombres*. There were Hugh SeCheverell himself, Mike Marranzino, Fred Salten, Bud Akers. Five saddles were slapped down on five fidgeting horses. There was a jam at the door as the livery stable belched vengeance.

Sheriff Moore, thundering up the street on his big black horse, and followed by half a dozen whooping riders, waved a hand. Joe's contingent, with answering shouts, joined the tumultuous procession.

"They went towards Columbine!" came Sheriff Moore's roar.

"Let's go!" the horde yelled back:

and they went! An even dozen, and every man a crack shot as well as a riding fool. A number of them—in fact, two-thirds of them—had noticed the riders on the yellow horses in town, and hence needed no description of the quarry. Those who hadn't seen the strangers heard of them now from their galloping comrades.

ANDY SILBERBERG let out a joyous shout.

"I'm getting me a yellow horse!" he announced, confidently.

But there was no sign of the yellow horse gang along the first couple of miles of the Columbine road. The road, hard-packed and well-traveled, made trailing of the quintet impossible.

Sheriff Moore, in the lead, set a terrific pace, however. The possemen pressed on eagerly. But Deputy Sheriff Joe Daly rode mechanically. He was frowning. His blue eyes were troubled.

"There's something wrong somewhere!" he was telling himself for the twentieth time. "Those yellow riders may be cool, calculating, devils, but they must be crazy, too—to come into town and stop to eat, right after committing a brutal murder!

"It's a wonder they didn't go for their guns when we walked into the café and they saw our badges! They took their time leaving, too!"

Joe, ducking his head low over his horse's neck, lit a cigarette. He could think better, more clearly, when he was smoking.

"And a girl on a yellow horse, too!" thought Joe, remembering what the jabbering John Wells had told him. "She must be one of the gang. There isn't a real yellow horse in all Conejos County.

"But if she is one of the outfit, where did she go? She didn't come into Crooked Creek. And why did she wave at John Wells?"

But there were no answers to any of Joe's questions.

"Maybe," he decided at length, "John Wells is right and it *is* the old Malcado gang, back from New Mexico, to raise more rumpus! Well, whoever they are, we'll know soon—they can't be far away!"

But in that Joe Daly was wrong, it seemed. Whoever the yellow horse riders were, it appeared that they had dropped off the earth. Six miles along the road to Columbine, the perplexed sheriff drew rein. The posse, bewildered, went into a conference.

"They've ditched us," said Sheriff Moore. "We'll spread out and go back. It'll be tough work, now, if we run into them, split up like we're going to be. But use your heads and your guns—any gun shots will be a signal to all to close in—"

THE posse melted away. Joe Daly, swinging far to the west, made for some distant ravines he knew. But they were silent—and empty. Edging along the more distant buttes, Joe sought his prey hopefully. He found none.

As he rode, he wondered again if it could be the old Malcado gang, run out of Colorado by Sheriff Moore some years before, and now back in their old territory for further depredations.

He also pondered again on the nerve of the killers in riding straight into town for lunch, and he tried to figure out where the girl member of the gang had g o n e—provided, of course, that John Wells hadn't mistaken a man for a girl.

But, as before, Joe could find no answers to his questions, especially: "Where had the yellow horse riders vanished?"

An hour, two hours, three hours, and the widely scattered posse still combed the territory toward Columbine, still without a single clue to

the whereabouts of the strangers on the yellow horses. What was more mysterious, Sheriff Moore could find no one who had even seen the unique horsemen.

"There's a heap of strangers in Columbine for the opening of the rodeo there tomorrow," said those who chanced to come from that direction. "But we didn't see nobody on a yellow horse, Sheriff. Buckskins always were rare in Conejos County, anyway."

"They're sure-enough rare now," admitted Sheriff Moore.

An hour or so before dusk, the little posse reassembled on Bear River, a few miles out of town. Fresh riders, constantly coming in during the course of the day, failed to bring any reassuring news. The riders of the yellow horses had simply been swallowed up by the ground, it seemed.

No one had seen them. And every inch of ground west of Crooked Creek, toward Columbine, had been gone over with a fine toothed comb.

"Well, boys, we're beat!" said Sheriff Moore. "They've holed up mighty clever somewhere. But tomorrow—"

And the posse started homeward, hearts heavy, horses done up.

BUT a mile from Crooked Creek, Joe, who was riding in the lead, started, swore softly, and set spurs to his tired horse.

"Edna! he grunted. "And on a yellow horse!"

The posse, awakening, followed him. They sped toward the girl galloping to meet them. It was Edna, sure enough—Edna Thompson, belle of the Iliff ranching district, her golden hair free in the breeze, her lithe form snug in boy's overalls.

And she was riding a yellow horse, a yellow horse with white mane and tail, a yellow horse none had ever seen her on before!

"Say, kid, where did you get that horse?"

It was Joe Daly, stern, deadly, who shot the question at Edna. He cut in on the pretty girl's greetings crisply, almost angrily, despite the fact that everyone in the posse knew that he liked Edna Thompson a lot, that he rode with her often, that there had been whispers that he and she were sweethearts.

"What do you mean, Joe?" cried the girl, her face going pale.

"I asked you—where did you get that horse?"

"I bought him today!" answered the girl. "I traded for him!"

"Where?"

"AT our ranch. Some men came along—"

"All riding yellow horses?"

"Yes, and this one was a little lame, and they traded it to me for Jerry. Dal thought it was a good trade. This is a good horse. I rode into town to show it to you—and heard about the murder—and that you were out—so I came out—and—and—"

The girl hesitated. There were black looks on the strained faces of the possemen. Joe himself was regarding her strangely.

"Why, Joe!" she exclaimed. "You don't think that I—"

"I don't think anything!" said Joe, wearily. "I've been thinking all day and all I've done is just muddle myself up nice. What I can't understand is, if you traded for that yellow horse early this morning, then that gang must have had Jerry, your bay, before the Wilmot killing. They didn't have it in Crooked Creek with them. What did they do with it?

"Were you the one who waved at John Wells this morning, Edna?"

The girl, her smile gone now, nodded. "I waved at John," she said, simply.

"Then what—?" began Joe, quick-

ly, but he checked himself. He turned to the posse—and to Sheriff Moore. The old smile was flickering on his lips again.

"Well, boys," he said. "I guess Edna can't be blamed for making a good horse trade, at that. I reckon those *hombres* knew they couldn't get along with a lame horse. I'd like to know what they did with Edna's bay, though. However—"

SHERIFF MOORE, apparently, was anxious to get back to town.

"You ought to be careful who you trade horses with, Miss Thompson," he growled. "We may find out that all them yellow horses is stolen stock, and then you'll be out a horse. Come on, boys, let's go. We'll have a hard day ahead of us tomorrow, I'm thinking!"

The posse went, and Edna and Joe with them—except that Edna and Joe lagged behind. The girl, mentioning something about the yellow horse being too lame to trot, although she had met the posse at a gallop, pulled her mount to a walk. Joe pulled down accordingly.

He lit a cigarette, his mind racing wildly.

"Edna," he said, finally, turning to look her full in the eyes, "I started to ask you a question in front of the bunch, but I caught myself in time. I was afraid to ask it.

"But what I want to know now is this: How come you were riding near the Wilmot place when John Wells saw you? You must have been pretty close there, on your new yellow horse, when poor old Wilmot was slain—"

Joe paused. He didn't have the heart to go on.

"I know what you're thinking, Joe," said the girl, somewhat stiffly. "You think I'm holding back something. Well, maybe I am. It's a secret, I guess.

"I—I was sort of trailing those fellows, to make sure they weren't abusing poor Jerry. I followed them quite a distance—for that reason—and to try to find out if they were camping near our place, as they said—as one of them said—when he told me he'd be back later—"

"Back later!" exploded Joe, in amazement.

"Yes," said Edna, eyes filling with tears. "I didn't mean to tell you, Joe, but I guess I must. Yes, one said he'd be back later—so I trailed them. But I didn't see them stop at Wilmot's. I turned aside before they reached there, I guess. And when the fellow came back—"

"Did one come back?" cried Joe.

"Yes, this afternoon, just before I came to town," said the girl, nodding. "It was what he said that scared me. He didn't say anything about the murder. I didn't hear of it until I reached town, but he did say—that—that he and his pals—were going to hold up the Columbine rodeo tomorrow—and get the box-office money—a lot of it—all of it—that it was a secret.

"And he said, that afterwards, he'd come back again—he liked me—and he'd have money—and we might elope—but there, Joe, you have my secret—I had to tell you!"

But Joe, deadly white, looked like he had apoplexy!

CHAPTER III

The Rodeo Raid

A PICKED bunch of hard-riding, straight-shooting dare-devils flashed out of Crooked Creek at noon the next day, well-mounted, well-armed. They were ready for the business at hand, even if that business was looking Death in the face—and laughing at it!

They were headed for Columbine, straight as the crow flies.

Columbine, deep in the excitement of its annual rodeo, had not been informed of the impending disaster that threatened it. Sheriff Moore, hearing of the planned robbery of the rodeo ticket office from Joe, after Joe had received the tip from Edna Thompson, was first amazed, then grimly amused.

"FINE!" the old sheriff had exploded, almost mirthfully. "I never did care much for that Columbine marshal, Waxham, and now's our chance to do two things. We'll surprise him and we'll surprise that yellow horse gang—and we can wipe the gang out if we have any sort of luck at all.

"That'll be a good thing for the whole State of Colorado, particularly if it is the old Malcado gang riding again. We'll fight fire with fire—gun fire, boy!"

It was pleasant news to Joe Daly's adventurous soul.

"We'll get a few of the real fellows together and go over and wait—and swoop in at the right minute!" exclaimed Joe.

"Exactly," said Sheriff Moore, his eyes sparkling with renewed youth. "It'll be like the old days in Crooked Creek, boy! If we sent word over to Columbine that there was to be a robbery, they'd make such elaborate and apparent preparations that the yellow horsemen could see how the land lay in a twinkling; they probably wouldn't strike and would not be caught and would remain a menace to the county. If we handle 'em, boy—*we'll handle 'em!*"

"You bet!" agreed Joe, his heart pounding.

So the little posse that roared out of Crooked Creek at noon had been most carefully chosen. There were Hugh SeCheverell, the deadliest gunman in all Western Colorado; Frank Bohn, who had three notches on his new gun; Bud Akers, who'd rather fight than eat; Art Black, who thrived on gunpowder; Harry Huffman, who always packed a pair of twin six-guns; John Wells and Sam Finnie and Harlan Gibbs, marksmen all, in addition to Sheriff Ed Moore and Deputy Sheriff Joe Daly.

Ten men—and every man a proven whirlwind with a gun!

The posse, cutting straight out across the country, disdained all roads and trails. They meant to get to Columbine in a hurry—and yet not too early. The sheriff, thinking things out carefully, had decided that the bandits would not strike the ticket office until the bulk of the ticket buyers had paid in their money and passed into the great grandstand.

The sheriff wasn't hankering to show up with his men early enough to forewarn the Columbine folks and, in turn, probably frighten away the would-be robbers.

"We'll split up on the outskirts of Columbine," the sheriff had told his posse, "and go in by twos. We'll be all milling around that ticket office until the yellow horse boys strike—and then it's every doggone *hombre* for himself. And the bird that doesn't bring down two of the varmints doesn't ride again on any posse with Joe and me!"

"BUT, jumping jackrabbits, Sheriff!" Sam Finnie had protested. "If there's only five bandits, how can each one of us ten get two? I ain't studied arithmetic for a long time now, but that don't seem right!"

"There may be more'n five bandits, son," said Sheriff Moore. "If there ain't, every man shoot two anyway. That'll mean we'll get 'em all, even if SeCheverell gets nervous and shoots himself!"

There was a laugh at that. SeCheverell never got nervous.

"Only thing I wish," said Joe, speaking up above the clatter of

hoofs, "is that we let Earl Barry come along. He wanted to—"

"If Earl could ride like he can shoot, I'd let him," said the sheriff. "But Earl never did get well acquainted with a horse, and this ain't no funeral procession!"

It wasn't, to be sure. The way that flying posse jumped ravines, splashed creeks, slid slopes, crashed thickets, would have convinced anyone watching that it was anything but. In a bit less than two hours, the posse panted to a halt on a hilltop.

Beyond lay Columbine. The roads leading into the frontier town were thick with riders, wagons, buggies, stages.

"We're in time, boys," said Sheriff Moore. "We'll ooze down there in pairs. Team up anyway you like, and just remember not to attract too much attention. And if any Columbine nitwit asks you how come, just say you're in town for the rodeo —see?"

Quick nods, impatient spurs—the posse melted away.

Joe, tearing down the slope at a reckless gallop, found himself riding beside Harry Huffman — and Harry, urging his big black horse on with various pet names, some of them fiery, was scowling.

"I'd enjoy this more," gasped Huffman, "if there was just two of us instead of ten! We'll waste a lot of valuable lead!"

JOE grinned. He was too busy thinking to answer Huffman's sally—thinking of the seriousness of the affair ahead, thinking of Edna Thompson, thinking of the suspicious way in which the sheriff had received Edna's tip—as if Moore suspected Edna of knowing more about the yellow horse riders than she had told!

His mind busy with such thoughts, Joe lost his smile. What if the five tough *hombres* who had passed through Crooked Creek on the yellow horses and who were now about to stage a sensational robbery, proved too much for the Crooked Creek posse? Someone would be hurt—many someones, no doubt.

And why, after all, had Edna mixed in with the miscreants, trading a horse with them? But it was like Edna, always unafraid—

"Better pull up," came Harry Huffman's cool voice. "We're there!"

THEY were. Joe, blinking, found himself and Huffman right in the midst of the rodeo crowd—that part of the crowd that hadn't as yet dismounted, tied up, and passed through the ticket gates.

Glancing about, Joe saw Sheriff Moore and Bud Akers at the ticket window. They were off their horses and apparently meaning to enter the grounds and cover the ticket office from the immediate rear. Sam Finnie and John Wells loomed far to the right. Art Black and Hugh McCheverell were off to the extreme left. Frank Bohn and Harlan Gibbs were not in sight, but Joe knew they were somewhere close, ready for emergencies.

The Columbine Sleep Wreckers' band was thumping away joyously in the grandstand. The grandstand, Joe saw, was packed tight with cheering humanity. The paddocks and the unused corrals stretching out from both ends of the stands were packed, too, with those who paid less and stood for their fun.

The rodeo infield was lined with horsemen. On the track, lining up for the first event of the afternoon's long program, were a dozen of the fleetest cowponies in Western Colorado, all set, it appeared, for the half-mile dash that would pick the fastest cowhorse and mean a fat two hundred dollars in the pocket of the owner of said horse.

A gun cracked. The starter leaped

back. There was a momentary swirl of dust—and then, from it, emerged the dozen horses, all running like frightened deer.

The packed grandstand let out a great whoop of encouragement. The band forgot its tune but kept on blaring. The ponies, bunched at the first turn, began to string out on the far stretch. A blue roan, which Joe Daly recognized as a Crooked Creek horse, was ahead. He maintained his lead at the last turn. But a bay and a sorrel began to overtake him in the home stretch now.

Down the track they came, lickety-split, seeming fairly to fly. The grandstand was divided in sentiment.

"Come on, you blue roan! Come on, Crooked Creek!"

"You sorrel—hooray for Columbine!"

"The bay—the bay—scratch that bay horse, cowboy!"

It was a heart-gripping finish. The roan, the sorrel and the bay, nose and nose, were thudding down in front of the grandstand now. The finish wire was yards ahead—feet ahead—inches ahead! The blue roan, with a greater heart than the bay and the sorrel, thrust his long nose out—and out—and out!

JOE DALY, standing up in the stirrups, craned his neck to see the finish. Harry Huffman, grumbling at his fidgeting black, straightened in his saddle. Every eye in that vast throng was fastened, it seemed, on that blue roan's nose—

"Bang—bang, bang—bang!"

The four shots rang out sharply, a split-second before the huge assemblage broke out in a deafening, thunderous roar for the victorious roan. Joe, whirling his horse, dashed straight at the ticket office, but two men, heads tucked down between their shoulders, were already running, ducking through the crowd.

Bud Akers, leaping up on the top rail of the fence, opened fire. Almost instantly, an answering shot came from a horseman pivoting almost at Gibb's elbow. Akers dropped, clutching at an arm. Gibb's gun flashed. The man who had shot Akers slumped in the saddle.

Joe Daly, crashing through the crowd, brought his gun butt down sharply on the head of one of the fleeing foot racers. The man dropped like a poled ox. Money seemed to spill from him and roll in all directions.

BUT as Joe straightened up after delivering the blow, the whine of a bullet sang past his ear and his hat seeming to grow wings suddenly, flew swiftly to one side.

Bedlam had broken loose in earnest now. There was firing on all sides. John Wells, coming in at a gallop, his guns belching, reeled dizzily, dropped first one gun, then the other. He clutched crazily at the saddle horn, missed it, and spun down into the flying dust.

Another bullet whistled perilously close to Joe's face. But this time Joe saw its source. A flash from Joe's left hand—and a rider on a plunging bay horse raised himself up in his stirrups, tossed his gun in a high gesture and toppled off the horse, dead or sorely wounded.

Sam Finnie, his horse shot from under him, was struggling in a hand-to-hand combat with a husky stranger. A knife blade flashed momentarily and Sam staggered backward, making a wild effort to regain his poise. A fusillade of shots rang out swiftly. The man who had knifed Finnie went down, in a heap.

Sheriff Moore, swinging his guns around for another quarry, felt the hot breath of a horse on his neck. The next second he had been mercilessly ridden down, trampled, sprawled on the ground.

Everybody was shooting, it seemed

to Joe. Art Black, unhorsed, was leaning back against the white, bullet-spattered ticket office, firing as fast as he could shoot and reload. Beside him, bleeding from a gash in the cheek, was Hugh SeCheverell.

JOE, spinning his horse around, saw that Art and Hugh were concentrating on four men who had sought refuge behind a farmer's wagon and team. The team was down, riddled. Joe, jabbing his mount, went toward the wagon—but the next instant his horse seemed to fold up under him. The animal went down, kicking, while Joe, almost knocked breathless in the fall, wormed out from under him.

"At 'em, boys—*at 'em!*" came a frenzied whoop, close at hand.

Firing as he ran went Harry Huffman. Frank Bohn was right behind him. Even as SeCheverell, with a howl of mingled rage and pain, dropped to one knee, a bullet in one leg, Harlan Gibbs appeared on the far side of the wagon, fire and smoke heralding his advance.

Joe, jumping up, ran to join him, where they could flank the wagon and get the bandits there under cross fire. But Gibbs stopped firing at that moment. He stood as if paralyzed for the briefest fraction of a second, then wavered, collapsed.

But Joe and Sheriff Moore and Art James and Huffman and Bohn were shooting again now, and the screen of fire that had been coming from the wagon ceased abruptly.

Joe, guns in hand, ran for the wagon recklessly.

But no gun poked out of it to stop him, no bullet dropped him in his tracks. Huffman panted up. Three men, sprawled as they had fallen, lay in the wagon bed. They were dead or severely wounded.

"Look out—there he goes—there he goes!" came a wild cry.

Joe swung around just in time to see a tall, dark-faced man, a hideous snarl on his face, tear by on a plunging yellow horse.

"It's old Malcado himself!" came Sheriff Moore's hoarse shout. "Stop him—get him, Joe. Get him, Harry!"

There was a split second in which to get him. Three guns spoke. The next instant, however, the yellow horse had whisked his rider out of range.

"It *was* the Malcado bunch!" cried the sheriff. "And Malcado got away, Joe! Why did you let him?"

But Joe wasn't answering. He was leaning against the wagon, eyes wide, mouth open, utter consternation on his flushed face.

"That yellow horse, that silver-mounted saddle," he started to gasp, but he caught himself abruptly. Why tell the world he had recognized the yellow horse as the one Edna Thompson had so recently traded for, that he recognized the silver-mounted saddle as Edna's?

CHAPTER IV

Fire and Lead

MEANTIME, in Crooked Creek, all hades had ripped loose! Scarcely had Sheriff Ed Moore and Deputy Sheriff Joe Daly ridden off with their little posse for Columbine, than five riders, atop five flashing yellow horses, appeared galloping up Main Street as if by magic.

At the corner of Main and Pecos Streets, four of the riders jumped from saddles. Two of them ran straight for the State Bank; the other two plunged into the Citizens Trust Bank.

The fifth man, with the horses, yanked a carbine from a saddle scabbard. He raised himself in his stirrups, expectantly.

Almost instantly, the sound of

heavy gun firing rolled from out the State Bank Building. It seemed but a long minute before the two bandits, one with his arms loaded with money sacks, the other brandishing two six-guns, reappeared on the street and made for the horses.

A bank clerk, more brave than wise, popped out of the doorway of the State Bank, lifting a rifle to his shoulder—but the man with the carbine bowled him over instantly.

CITIZENS, alarmed by the firing, began to gather. Storekeepers rushed to the sidewalks—but the man with the carbine fired first in one direction, then in the other—and the curious vanished into doorways in a veritable stampede.

While the man with the carbine seemed to have eyes in all directions, one of the State Bank robbers methodically stowed away his loot in saddle bags. The other robber, still brandishing his twin guns, rushed towards the Citizens Trust Bank, as if intending to aid the two outlaws who had entered there. But his services were not needed, it appeared.

Before he could reach the bank entrance, one of the men who had rushed that institution came tearing out, grasping two heavy canvas sacks. The remaining member of the team appeared, walking backwards, apparently quite at ease, but shooting from two guns, effectively covering his comrade's retreat.

In a twinkling, all five men were mounted, whirling—

It was at that moment that Earl Barry, who had gone home disgusted because Sheriff Ed Moore hadn't chosen him for the Columbine posse, appeared on Main Street. Quick-witted, a crack shot, Barry took in the situation in half a glance.

A flash of his right hand and his gun was out, barking. The man with the carbine swung in his saddle, aimed at Barry, and opened up—but the shots fell short as the fellow wilted down over his horse's neck, relaxed, tumbled from the saddle. Barry's bullets had been the faster.

But even as the outlaw fell in the street, his thoughts must have been for his companions' safety, for he raised himself on one elbow, and with his dying breath—and strength—squeezed the trigger of a six-gun, sending a slug ripping through Earl Barry's shoulder.

Barry went down—while the dazed spectators stood spellbound.

The other four riders, with the fifth yellow horse galloping riderless after them, tore down Main Street for a block, swung the first corner to the West, and were gone. Barry, staggering to his feet, let out a bellow of rage. "You men—wake up. Get horses—get guns—get going!"

And then Barry fainted from shock and pain.

When Barry fell for the second time, it broke the spell. Andy Silberberg, the postmaster, was the first to regain his wits. He dashed out of the postoffice, swinging a baseball bat. "Volunteers!" he screamed. "Let's go!"

His cry was magic. Everyone went—but in all directions. The bank employes began to pour out of both looted establishments.

THE State Bank, it developed, had lost close to six thousand dollars, all the paper money it had on hand, taken at the points of guns and crammed into money sacks. The bandits there had refused silver. The teller, Bill Devlin, who had rushed to the door with the rifle, had been shot dead in his tracks.

The Citizens Trust Bank had lost a little less than four thousand, in gold and bills, and two of the bank staff had been slightly wounded as the bandit covering the retreat had fired into the building. No resistance had been offered the bandits

in either of the places, it was said.

While the postmaster, bankers and a few late-comers had been carrying the unconscious Barry and the dead teller into a near-by house, and the slain bandit into a vacant store, the first of the volunteer posse began to reassemble. Old men, young men, boys—all armed with rifles, shotguns, revolvers and clubs, and mounted on horses, mules, ponies and burros. It was a motley crew, but the postmaster, Silberberg, took quick command.

HE spotted a townsman with an extra horse. He ran to it, swung into the saddle, and started up Main Street. The others followed him as a matter of course. In a few minutes, more than a hundred riders were strung out on the trail of the bandits. The yellow horse gang had apparently taken the Columbine road, but when Silberberg and his cohorts galloped along it, there were no traces of the outlaws to be found.

The makeshift posse, however, continued to ride and soon there were really four posse on the road—the good riders on good mounts far ahead; then the slow riders and mediocre horses, bunched; then the pony brigade; and, lastly, those who had ambled out on burros.

It was the first of these groups that met Sheriff Moore, Deputy Joe Daly and the remnants of their bruised and battered battalion returning from Columbine.

"The banks have been held up!" was the postmaster's frenzied greeting. "Five men on yellow horses held up the town, shot two men, got about ten thousand dollars and fled. We thought they came along this road, but we haven't seen hide nor hair of them!"

"Five men on yellow horses?" cried Joe Daly. "What time did all this happen, Andy?"

"Shortly after noon—soon after you left!" said Silberberg.

The sheriff and Joe exchanged amazed glances. Art James, Harry Huffman and Frank Bohn, the only other members of the rodeo posse able to ride, sat on their horses, staring.

"The yellow horse gang was at the Columbine rodeo stickup, and yet it struck the Crooked Creek banks at almost the same time!" exclaimed Sheriff Moore. "I don't quite get it! But I reckon we're riding again, boys, and riding dang soon, too—eh, Joe?"

But Joe, without a word to anyone, was riding out around the group of horsemen, and hitting for Crooked Creek at a mad gallop.

There was the wildest disorder in Crooked Creek when Joe Daly thundered in on a spent horse. Throngs jammed Main Street. Almost everyone carried weapons of some sort.

There were rumors that the postmaster's posse had overtaken the yellow horse bandits and engaged them in battle, with heavy losses on both sides.

"Where's the body of that dead bandit?" he wanted to know, after he had branded the rumor of a clash as false. "I want to see it!"

"It's in the vacant store building next to the postoffice!"

JOE hurried there. The coroner and a group of curious were there. One glance at the dead bandit and Joe nodded his head.

"That's one of the five tough *hombres* that came through here and had lunch at the Aladdin café!" he assured the coroner. "I'd know him in a million. But I didn't know any of the seven outlaws we plugged over at Columbine this afternoon—"

"What about that fracas over there?" cried the coroner.

"Sheriff Moore will tell you all about that," said Joe, backing away. "I got business to attend to—quick!"

And he attended to it, at once.

Snatching up a fresh horse at the SeCheverell livery barn, he pelted out of town, heading straight south, toward the Iliff ranching district. There was no trace of Joe's perpetual smile on his face now. He was frowning, his heart was aching, his mind was crowded with doubts and suspicions.

"I'm all-fired dumb, I guess," he muttered, "or else someone is awfully smart! How that gang could strike in two places at almost the same time is beyond me—with yellow horses showing up in both raids.

"BUT one thing I do know, and that is—Edna Thompson is going to have to explain to me how come her saddle figured in that Columbine fight, and the yellow horse she was supposed to have traded for. I'm interested in that point a heap!"

Joe rode with a reckless abandon born of desperation. He knew he must see Edna and get an explanation from her before others—who might be less gentle with her than he would be—could get to the Thompson place. There was bound to be someone in Crooked Creek who would point the finger of suspicion at Edna, seeing that some members of the earlier posse had seen her on the yellow horse.

There was the possibility, too, that someone might have recognized that ornate silver saddle in Columbine before or during the battle there.

But Edna, it developed, wasn't at home, when he reached the Thompson ranch. Her tall brother, Bud, met Joe at the rear door of the house. Bud, as good a wrangler as ever forked a cayuse, shook his head at Joe's blurted question as to Edna's whereabouts.

"I was busting a bad 'un over to the King ranch," said Bud, "and I just got home. But I heard Edna say this morning, early, that she was thinking of riding over to the Columbine rodeo with a girl by the name of Florence. I guess maybe she did—"

"But you're not sure of that, Bud?" asked Joe, impatiently.

"No. You see, I didn't see her leave—" began Bud.

"Has she still got that new yellow horse she traded for?"

"I guess so," grinned Bud. "She sure slickered someone out of a fine horse. He was supposed to be lame, but he isn't."

Joe grunted. There was something mighty peculiar about that yellow horse trade, he became convinced. He swung toward his horse, hesitating, trying to determine what to do, but a shout from Bud decided him.

"Here comes Edna now!"

Turning, Joe saw two girls approaching on one horse. Edna, slipping to the ground, ran to him with troubled eyes.

"They stole my horse!" she cried, impulsively. "They had the most terrible fight at Columbine, Joe—and they stole my new horse—"

"The yellow horse?" said Joe, slowly, his eyes narrowed.

"Yes—I left him at a hitchrail while Florence and I went to the rodeo—up in the grandstand. And while we were there a gang of robbers and some officers had a battle—a lot killed, I think—"

JOE nodded. Then, with a jerk of his head, he said:

"Let's walk over to the corral, Edna. I want to talk to you." He led the way; she, wondering, followed him.

"Listen, Edna," said Joe, "I think a lot of you, but—folks will be talking, soon, in Crooked Creek, about that yellow horse you had. You told me you traded for him—and now Malcado, the leader of that gang in the battle over to Columbine, rides him away.

"It all looks mighty fishy—even to

—to me—kid. I—I hate to say this—but—what *else* do you know about that yellow horse gang?"

The girl looked startled. She paled.

"Why, Joe, you don't believe that I—" she began, frightened.

"I DON'T want to believe it," said Joe, grimly. "But it doesn't look right, Edna—you can see that yourself. First, old Wilmot slain; then, you're seen on a yellow horse. You admit to the sheriff you traded for him—with the outlaws—and now the outlaw leader uses that very horse, conveniently parked for him at the rodeo, to escape.

"The sheriff didn't like that horse trade. I could tell that when he heard about it. When he finds out that the same horse carried Malcado out of our clutches—yes, we were in that fight at Columbine—I hate to think what he is going to say—or do.

"The murder, the Columbine fight, the bank robberies in Crooked Creek—"

"Bank robberies in Crooked Creek?"

"Yes—the yellow horse boys did that, too, Edna," said Joe, unhappily. "I think you'd better tell me the truth—"

Edna threw her head back, proudly. Her eyes flashed fire.

"I've told you the truth, Joe Daly—every word I've told you is the gospel truth!" she stormed. "But I didn't tell you all. You rushed away yesterday, mad, I guess, when I told you about one of that gang planning to come back. You rushed away and didn't invite me to go to the rodeo with you, like you have in past years. So I didn't have the chance to tell you.

"But I think I know where that gang is hiding. I told you I didn't see them go to Wilmot's, although I was trailing them after the trade. I think—I am sure—they're around that old deserted Cooper ranch, up Gopher Gulch. They were headed that way when I saw them last!"

Joe's eyes widened, gradually, hopefully.

"And what else, Edna?" he asked, his voice not quite steady.

"Nothing else, Joe Daly," said the girl, spiritedly, "except that you don't need to come out here any more. I don't want ever to go riding with you again—or to go to dances with you—or to hear your name. I don't want to set eyes on you—"

Joe shrugged his shoulders, turned and swung onto his horse. There was something in his silence, in his manner, that alarmed the girl.

"Where are you going now, Joe?" she asked, apprehensively.

"To the Cooper ranch," he said, almost sullenly.

"But not alone?" Edna cried.

"Yes—alone. If it's a wild goose chase you're sending me on, I prefer to be alone!"

He saw the swift pain that darted into her eyes.

"If it's the truth," he hastened to add, "I'd still better be alone. Others might wonder—and ask—and wouldn't understand—how you happened to know the gang's hideout and why you hadn't told before today's trouble. I'll be seeing you, Edna!"

"No!" said the girl, vehemently.

JOE spoke to the horse. A second later he was clattering away from the Thompson ranch, leaving behind a sad-eyed girl, a surprised Bud, and an astonished Florence.

"Say, your fellow isn't very polite!" exclaimed Florence, as Edna walked up:

"He tore away like he was sore at all of us!"

Edna's chin came up, haughtily.

"He isn't my fellow," she said, hotly. "I wouldn't have him if he was the last man on earth, so there!"

CHAPTER V

Yellow Horses and Men

THE dilapidated buildings of the Cooper ranch, long deserted, looked innocent enough, nestling in the afternon sun. But Joe Daly took no chances. He circled the place, halfway around and more, before he yanked out his gun, clapped spurs to his horse, and dashed straight at the old ranch house, expecting every moment to be met with a withering fire of hot lead.

He was mistaken. He reached the house unmolested. He flung himself from the saddle, lit running, sprang for the door. It gave under his thrust. He half jumped, half fell, into the old house. Gun up, eyes roving, hat gone, he let out a crisp command.

"Come out of there, you rats!"

Echoes alone answered his challenge. Holding his breath, Joe listened. Not a sound. Nothing—anywhere. Then, breathing a prayer that he wasn't walking foolishly into an ambush, Joe started on through the house.

The worn floorboards creaked now as he walked on them. This room was bare. And this. And the next.

But the back room—Joe stopped dead in his tracks.

The room was littered with fresh debris. There were cans, recently emptied, on the floor. Matches. Cigarette stubs. Discarded food. Here, indeed, someone—many someones, from the looks of things—had lately lived. But the birds, apparently, had flown.

Joe, his gun ready, rummaged on. The pantry was as stark as the front rooms. The rear porch was the same.

"The barn!" thought Joe. "They may be in the barn!"

He ran for the old barn, again expecting to hear the crash of guns all about him. But again there was nothing but absolute silence. In the barn, however, Joe found evidences of horses lately stabled there. The corral, to the rear of the barn, also offered mute testimony of recent use.

Stooping, he picked up an old currycomb from the floor. There was a strand of horse hair in it—yellowish-white hair, tell-tale hair.

"The yellow horses were here, sure enough!" breathed Joe, sadly.

HE swung to go back to the house, but his keen, roving eyes stopped him. There was a fresh trail of hoofprints from the corral toward a mesquite thicket west of the barn. He paused for a second, whipped out his gun again, started along the trail.

"There's still a chance!" he thought.

The trail zig-zagged through the mesquite, toward a big ravine. It was probably the way to water, Joe decided. He proceeded quickly, but cautiously. Reaching the brink of the ravine he peered over—only to draw back hastily, smothering an exclamation.

Five yellow horses were in the ravine, but—

A second glance confirmed Joe's first suspicion. The five yellow horses *were* in the ravine, sure enough. But they were dead.

Joe slid down the slope with the agility of a cat.

It was as he thought. The five horses had been shot to death. Each bore a bullet hole in the head. They had been killed instantly, deliberately, heartlessly.

A feeling of greater contempt than ever for the outlaws welled up in Joe's heart.

"Sacrificing five horses like those in their dirty work!" he snorted angrily. "It means only one thing—they've gone on other horses less conspicuous animals, knowing the

whole county will be looking for the yellow horses!

"There must be a trail around here somewhere that will point to their destination—and, by gosh, I'm going to find it if it takes me all afternoon!"

And Joe did find it, but in less than an hour. He finally got up from his knees with a satisfied grunt. He had covered a lot of territory, in a wide circle around the Cooper place, before he stumbled on the trail. Even then he wasn't sure, until he got down on his hands and knees and examined it carefully.

Satisfied, he got up, ran for his horse, took up the scent as keenly and eagerly as a foxhound. If he could follow that trail fast enough, he felt, he would yet have a chance to exchange gun slugs with the outlaws.

The trail, distinct enough at times, obscure and dim in places, led straight up Gopher Gulch until there wasn't any more Gopher Gulch. Then it wound up the shoulder of Squaw Mountain, almost to timber line, over ground that almost baffled Joe.

But he kept at it, often losing the blurred hoof marks, but always picking them up again by cannily proceeding in the direction he himself would have proceeded had he been leading the fugitive band.

THE trail dropped off the mountain, finally, into a valley where the lush grass fairly screamed direction to Joe. Here he pushed on with greater speed. Here, too, he began to realize that the outlaws were undoubtedly heading, in none too certain manner, for Wolf Creek pass, where they could drop down into the New Mexico country.

The realization pleased Joe immensely. He knew they couldn't make good time over the steep pass; and, with good luck, he'd be able to pick them up somewhere on the slope of the pass even if he should lose the trail completely.

An hour passed. Two hours. Three. The sun was lifting from the lower valleys, leaving them shrouded in purple. Joe and his tiring horse cast long shadows as they rode a ridge. It would soon be dusk, darkness, and the bandits would camp. He might surprise them then.

"I've got to surprise them!" he spoke aloud, as if to his horse. "I'm one against four or maybe more—the trail looks like half a dozen horses at least. If I can swoop down on them—"

BUT Joe didn't finish his remarks. Rounding a great pile of granite along the rocky ledge he was traversing, he saw, not two hundred feet ahead of him, a group of men and horses—bay horses, blacks, sorrels. The riders were gathered around a spring, resting. The bandits, undoubtedly!

Joe whirled his horse at right angles, in behind a protecting shoulder of rock, whipped out his gun and raised in his saddle—but at that instant a rider on a yellow horse loomed from out a thicket some twenty yards to Joe's left.

"Bang!" A bullet tore through Joe's hat, searing his scalp, half knocking him from the saddle.

"Malcado!" thought Joe, even as he fell. He let his frightened horse plunge away. He got to his knees, gun ready—but at that second the ledge roared with gunfire. Bullets spattered all about him.

Joe, worming his way to a better position, peeked around the sharp edge of a huge slab of granite just in time to snap his gun forward and catch one of the outlaws in the act of firing toward him.

The man fell forward and did not move.

Joe, catching his breath, glanced hastily about. Another one of the

group at the spring was already stretched out on the ground.

"Playing possum, must be!" grunted Joe, staring—and then the gunfire broke loose again with renewed fury. An outlaw, shielded behind the jumping, milling horses, was shooting with both hands. But, even as Joe watched, the fellow suddenly staggered and fell headlong.

"What in fury?" exclaimed Joe, thunderstruck at that.

THE fourth man at the spring, however, was still shooting. So was someone else, it seemed. A dozen shots were swiftly exchanged. Joe, coming to life, fired now—and the outlaw, seemingly surprised at the new angle of fire, jumped sideways. And at that moment a bullet from someone else's gun cut him down.

Joe, breathless, perspiration running from his forehead, hastily squirmed on along the ledge. And it was well he did so, too, for the next second the evil face of Malcado himself appeared above the spot Joe had just occupied; a six-gun was emptied down into the niche from which Joe had so recently fired. Joe's gun spurted flame again.

Malcado, caught full in the chest, stood still for a long second. Then, the fury on his face turning to a look of bewilderment, he fell forward on the ledge. Now he could see Joe—but again Joe's gun was the faster—and Malcado's weapon was plucked from his fingers by hot lead. It was then he raised the arm in token of surrender.

"Okay!" he called, almost cordially. "You got me, John Law—the breaks of the game were with you. You almost got them rats, too, but I beat you to them. I got them!"

Joe stood up warily. The four men who had been so lately drinking at the spring still sprawled as they had fallen. Apparently they had been "got" sure enough. Joe knew he had accounted for one—but why had Malcado turned on his own companions?

Malcado seemed to read the question on Joe's face.

"Listen, John Law!" he called, sharply. "Don't get me wrong—them birds weren't with me—never was. Rats, every last one of them! Listen—I never seen them but once before—down in Santa Fe—where my gang—and them—crossed trails a week ago!" Malcado, weakening, laid his hat down on his arm.

"I got wind of their plan—to steal a bunch of yellow horses from a Raton horse ranch, promenade with them—show them off—and come up here to murder a hermit they knew of—then kill the horses, bury them, escape the country on horses not so easily recognized!" Malcado groaned, shifted position, smiled grimly.

"SOMEHOW—they got wind of my plan, too—to hold up the Columbine rodeo. When we did, we ran into bunched hades. I figured we had been tipped off—I was the only one to get away in the mêlée—and as I ran along the hitch rail, looking for a good get-away horse, gosh if I didn't see a yellow one—a dead ringer for those these rats were using—and I took it—I couldn't resist—I couldn't—"

Malcado stopped, short of breath. The finger of death, Joe saw, had already touched the outlaw's face.

"Alone, hunted—I made for a hide-out I used years ago when I rode this country frequent," went on Malcado, in a softer tone. "The Cooper ranch. But I found it occupied when I reconnoitered it—edging in at dark, I listened—and it was these rats—laughing over betraying me—and fooling a deputy sheriff—and thereby getting away with ten thousand in good cold cash!"

"Go on!" urged Joe.

"Sure," grinned Malcado. "I am;

I am going a long ways, kid—I reckon the old devil is waiting for me, too. But listen. These rats, cowards at heart, had cracked two banks, I heard—by a little scheme. They had found out, somehow, that the deputy had a sweetheart.

"They found her, traded her a yellow horse, pretended to like her, pretended to foolishly let her in on a job they were going to pull—*my job*—the Columbine rodeo job!"

MALCADO coughed, winced, continued: "The girl told the deputy, as they figured she would. He blew for Columbine with all the good shots in town—I know that's true from the reception we got there—and these rats had a clear coast to handle the banks. They did.

"When I heard all that chin chatter, I made up my mind to follow them when they left the Cooper place—let them lug the stolen money as far as the New Mex border—and then, where I could jump out of Colorado easy, to ambush them—shoot them down like so many varmints." Again Malcado paused. His voice weakened. He made an effort to continue.

"I was trailing them when I saw you coming. I figured you was John Law. I figured you'd want me as bad as them—so I tried to get you first—and then I finished up the rats. And when your firing helped me, I realized I hadn't got you—so I come to get you good—when—when you put that danged slug in me! I'd sure appreciate a drink of water, John Law!" he murmured.

Joe, jumping up, ran for the spring. He came back carrying an old tin cup the yellow horse outlaws had been using when surprised. He held the water to Malcado's lips. Malcado, drinking slowly, seemed to regain a spark of life.

"Yellow horses," he said, sneeringly, "and yellow men! They had to use a girl and another man's gang to put their own business across!"

There was a clatter of hoofs on the ledge. Malcado must have heard, but he didn't open his eyes. Joe's eyes opened wide, however, as he turned quickly and recognized Sheriff Ed Moore, Harry Huffman, Art James, Al Winters, and a dozen other dusty Crooked Creek men.

"Why, hello, gents!" said Joe, in surprise. "I wasn't just expecting company just now. I—you see—"

"Yes, I see you got Malcado!" cried Sheriff Moore, in relief. "We were sure worried over you, Joe—going out on a trip like this by yourself. But Edna came tearing into town and told us where you had gone, and we trailed you from the Cooper ranch. When we heard a lot of shooting, we come galloping—"

Joe, peered into the midst of the riders with narrowed eyes, jumped to his feet hastily. "Edna?" he cried. "You here! You got nerve—"

"Sure I am here!" sang out Edna, mischievously. "I wasn't going to miss the excitement. But I guess I have. We're late, I reckon—"

The posse caught sight of the havoc around this spring.

"Say, Joe!" cried Sheriff Moore. "What did happen here? How—?"

"THE yellow horse gang is out there, boss—dead," said Joe. "I reckon all the plunder is out there, too. But it's a long story. I'll tell you all about it later. First I got to talk to Edna—"

"Is it about my yellow horse?" asked the girl, slipping from her saddle. "I see him out there, and he isn't hurt a bit—"

But Joe didn't answer. Instead, a broad grin on his face, he took her to one side, whispering. The possemen looked at one another and winked. Sheriff Ed Moore nodded solemnly. "Wedding bells!" he prophesied, smiling.

Ten *Seconds* Ahead

Hall pitched forward on top of the stage

Follow Lin Carwood, Mail Rider, Through a Raging White Blizzard and Roaring Gunsmoke on a Hell-for-Leather Race as He Bucks the Advent of the Stage-Coach

By WILTON WEST

Author of "Twisted Trails," "Boomerang Cartridges," etc.

LIN CARWOOD, muffled in fur cap, fur gloves, leather lumberjack and brown-hair chaps, his high-heeled boots encased in flannel-lined overshoes, hunched forward in his big stock saddle and gazed grimly ahead from eyes reddened by the biting northeaster. Everywhere was white mist—thick, icy, impenetrable—and the snow was driving against him and his handsome pinto like a million needles.

He muttered a curse as he lowered his face against the freezing blast, but

his big rowels drove again and again against his horse's flanks, relentlessly, as he rode on.

"Hell, all right," he muttered. "But I ain't never turned back yet, and I ain't turnin' back now. I'll beat Hall if it's the last thing I ever do."

He felt of the two mail-pouches latigoed to his cantle. Those pouches held the eastern mail which had arrived in Coyote the night before and which was to be delivered, on time, to the postmaster in Chaparral, over a rough fifty-mile route across the wasteland of southern Arizona.

AND not once during the two years Lin had had the mail-rider contract had he and his two mail-couriers ever been late, no matter what the weather or how desperate the renegade bands infesting the country.

An hour later, half frozen, he reached Grande Prairie, a tiny cowtown of some thirty adobe shacks, midway between Coyote and Chaparral. With stiffened fingers, he took out the mail for the Grande Prairie district, headed his pinto into the small stable behind Mexican Joe's saloon and strode to the little post office.

With every step he stamped his half-frozen feet, and banged his furred hands against his body, shivering in every muscle. His bronzed face was whipped almost raw. He tossed the mail to the old postmaster inside and waved one hand in greeting, then plunged on through the howling blizzard to Mexican Joe's saloon.

As he stepped inside, he glanced around. Mexican Joe, muffled about head and shoulders in a bright-colored *serape*, eyed him keenly and shoved forward a bottle and a glass over the greasy bar. At the far end of the long room, near a red-hot stove, half a dozen cowmen were playing poker. They merely glanced up for an instant, nodded to Lin briefly, and went on with their game.

A month before, before the new stage company had appeared, those men would all have been on their feet, giving Lin the old trail welcome, but the coming of the new stage line had gripped their fancy, and Lin and his mail-riders had seemed to drop back into the discard of ancient things.

As Lin lifted his glass, he missed the old welcome more than he would have admitted, and his blizzard-whipped gray eyes hardened a little.

"Hall's stage pass yet?" he asked Mexican Joe.

Mexican Joe grinned, nodded. "*Sí*. Eees ver' fast *hombre*, that fella. Hees seex-hoss stage bust the wind *muy pronto*. He been gone half hour now."

He poured out another drink for Lin and eyed him amusedly. "An' he say fer tell you you no can beat heem, an' he laugh mucho."

Lin's eyes flashed. Hall was making the first stage trip, and had boasted, back in Coyote, that he would beat Lin with ease, and would make Lin and his two riders of no more use.

Without waiting to take the second drink, Lin was outside again and pounding leather. His pinto, Shanks, seemed to have gained fresh strength by the few minutes inside the little stable. More miles through the blizzard swept behind man and horse.

SENSE of outrage coursed through Lin's brain as he galloped along. In his pocket reposed a note from Worden Hall, which had been handed him back in Coyote after Hall had left with the stage. It offered Lin the contract to handle the stage company's relay stations, which were being built along the route.

The offer included Lin's two riders, also, each at a hundred a piece and found, with himself to draw a hundred and fifty and found. A five-year contract, too.

But Lin's reddened eyes narrowed as he thought of that note now. Instead of remaining an employer and

the leader of his gallant little band of desert couriers, he would become just a "Yes, sir" man for the stage line! Resentment and contempt rushed through his mind, and his spurs jabbed home grimly.

He sent Shanks plowing ahead through the snow, feeling madder than ever at hearing how Worden Hall had boasted again. Well, he who laughs last, laughs best. He'd ride into Chaparral well ahead of Hall and his stage, proving to one and all that the faster time can always be made by a determined rider. And that victory would mean that he would be able to renew his mail-rider contract for another year, over Hall and his stage company.

Hall was a newcomer down here, and a Texan; and Lin, being Arizona born and bred, had a consuming contempt for bragging Texans.

As the miles slipped behind, Lin straightened more and more in his saddle. The sun was commencing to appear dimly at first; the mists were slowly vanishing; and once more the wasteland was beginning to feel less icy.

Before another hour had passed, the driving snow ceased and the biting wind began to be less cutting. Lin pushed on faster.

AT the next stop, Apache Station, a mere wide place in the trail, with a few adobe hovels and the usual saloon, Lin talked with the mayor—an old, white-haired desert rat who had once struck it rich, saved his money, settled here, set up the saloon and became mayor, drunk or sober.

Today he was sober and he greeted Lin warmly as they gripped hands. But old Mike McGann studied Lin's blizzard-seared face, shook his head and laid a gnarled hand on his shoulder.

"Ain't no use yuhr buckin' civilization, son," he stated. "This yere country's gotta expand. Stages gits the trade, m' lad, everywheres. Hall's company's gonna win, now or later. Our folks is honin' for advancement.

"Yuh oughta accept his offer. Handlin' all their stage stations'll mean a heap, as time passes, Lin. Mail riders is b e c o m i n' obsolete, son. Take his offer an' start runnin' them relay stage stations, an' who knows? Mebbe yuh'll see th' day whin yuh owns most th' whole durned outfit.

"Yuhr young yit, Lin, only twenty-six. Yuh'd be a big man out yere; an' Worden Hall admires yuh. I heerd 'im say so."

SOMETHING deep in Lin's mind responded at last. The sound logic forced itself home for the first time. The new vision swept through his thoughts with crashing force. What if old McGann were right, after all?

But Lin's old resentment could not be stilled by a few words of wisdom. His pride had been seared. He flung outside, back into his saddle, and sent Shanks racing away again at even greater speed.

"Damn if I'll give in!" he muttered. "I'll beat Hall so durned complete, this trip, that he can shove his contract tuh hell-and-gone! And I ain't servin' under no darned Texan, neither."

A mile farther on and he suddenly jerked to a sliding halt, for, from beyond a snow-covered ridge ahead, came sounds of rapid firing. He rose in his stirrups, listening keenly, grimly. The trail went over the ridge, but, beyond it, he could not see.

For the last half hour he had been racing along tracks of the stage's wheels through the snow. The wheel-tracks crossed over the ridge, evidently following an old emigrant road of long years ago.

Again came sounds of firing. Instantly there leaped into Lin's mind

one thought: "The Bolton gang!" His hand went back, unconsciously, to the mail-pouches latigoed to his cantle. The mail came first, no matter what. It must always be delivered on time, and, this trip, ahead of time, to win.

To detour now, swiftly, keeping out of the outlaws' sight by following deep arroyos, getting everything possible out of his splendid Shanks, that was the way to play the game, without delay. He lifted his reins.

But another thought flashed into his mind and assailed his resolve. He jerked Shanks back to a halt. Worden Hall, new to this *malpais* and its dangers, had laughed at talk of the Bolton gang; and now he was ahead, alone, probably half frozen, driving the hated stage. The northeaster had not come until after Hall had driven away from Coyote, and the man had not been dressed for any such terrible weather. If the Bolton gang was attacking Hall—

Suddenly it rushed through Lin's brain that, after all, it was not Worden Hall whom he hated—only what the man stood for—the stage company which was seeking to drive Lin and his two riders from their glorious business as mail-couriers.

Suppose the outlaws *were* attacking Hall, over beyond the ridge? What glory, then, would lie in Lin's winning this race? What victory, to beat a dead man? To ride away through the many deep arroyos and leave Hall to fight it out alone against those killers of the desert would be—cowardice!

LIN'S hand shot down to his six-gun, whipped it out and up. His rowels darted against Shanks' sweating, snow-packed flanks and the gallant pinto leaped forward eagerly. In a second's time, Lin was atop the ridge and looking down at the wide stretch of mesquite-and-snow-covered plain beyond.

The glare of the sun on the snow dazzled him for a moment, making red spots before his ice-seared eyes, but then he saw, and his teeth clicked together grimly.

He had encountered the Bolton gang before, and now he was seeing them again. Bolton himself, with three others, were around Hall's stage. The two swing horses of the stage's team were down and kicking in death struggles, dying from those shots Lin had heard.

THE outlaws were on their horses, their guns pointing at Hall, who was standing up at his driver's seat. His arms were elevated, and the long lines were dragging. Even as Lin watched, one of the outlaws fired and Hall sank down on top of the stage, limp.

The team, startled, reared and plunged, only held in place because of the two dead swing horses. And then Lin saw another man—a mounted outlook on a near-by hill.

Lin sent Shanks racing forward at headlong speed. He dropped his reins over his forearm and jerked out his other six-gun. With a gun in each hand now, he guided Shanks by leg pressure alone, to which the splendidly trained animal responded perfectly.

Lin rode straight for Bolton himself. The other outlaws had leaped from their saddles and were clambering up on the stage to get at the strong-box under the driver's seat. Bolton and his men did not see or hear Lin until he was within six-gun range. Then Bolton, big, burly, glowering, whirled his horse towards him and fired instantly.

Lin was conscious of a hot flash through the muscles of his left shoulder, but, with Shanks making such gigantic leaps, he got within fifty yards of Bolton before the man could fire again. And then Lin's guns spat flame.

Bolton lurched drunkenly in his saddle, straightened up for an instant, then toppled headlong. But one of his feet hung in the stirrup, and his horse, excited, only half-broken, dashed wildly away across the snow, dragging the outlaw chief's body which went bumping horribly over the frozen ground and snow-concealed rocks.

Lin swept onward towards the others at the stage, guns blazing. The three outlaws on the stage yelled. One leaped down on the far side of the stage, out of sight. The other two started shooting. The team, however, still reared and plunged wildly, causing the huge stage to sway badly and spoil the outlaws' aim.

Lin's next shot got one of the men, who went heels over head to the ground, close against a front wheel, which passed over his body sickeningly. The remaining two outlaws darted behind the stage's far side and sent more shots as Lin flung himself from his pinto horse at the stage's rear.

His quick dismounting was all that saved his life. The men's slugs whined over his head, but one grazed his fur cap, tearing away an ear flap and bringing blood from the lobe of his ear.

Then another shot burned along his left forearm.

He dropped instantly to one knee behind the stage's boot. He saw the two outlaws crouching beside the right front wheel, their legs plainly visible. His guns cracked and both men fell, yelling loudly.

IN a flying leap, he reached the top of the boot and scrambled to the top of the stage, flattening down instantly. He peered over the side of the stage. The two men were lying in the snow, gripping their wounded legs, and both were cursing savagely. Their guns lay half buried in the snow, several feet away. As they saw Linn, one yelled up: "Fer Gawd's sake, fella, don't shoot! Yuh got us both."

For a long moment, Lin hesitated, his trigger fingers hard to hold back. He gazed down at the two men, grimly conscious of wanting to drive a bullet into each loathsome face and blot it out forever. Both were wanted criminals, with rewards on their heads—dead or alive.

But stern self-repression came, and Lin's trigger-fingers lessened their slow, deadly pressure. To kill wounded men would be dastardly and against the rangeland code, and that code was deeply stamped in Lin Carwood's character.

He glanced at Worden Hall. Hall was lying limp on top of the stage, unconscious but moaning slightly. Blood was soaking his flannel shirt above one shoulder, and his left cheek was smeared with it.

LEAPING to the ground, Lin kicked the two outlaws' guns and, using a lariat from one of their saddles, roped each man's arms behind his back. Then he got the first aid kit from inside the stage and crudely bandaged the men's wounds. His bullets had grazed the flesh only, without breaking any bones. His own burning wounds he completely ignored.

"Yo're shore lucky," he told them as he finished. "Good this old stage was hidin' the rest o' yore bodies, for I aimed as high as I could."

They glowered at him from savage eyes. Suddenly Lin jerked straight and whirled towards the stage, for Worden Hall's voice, quivering with anger, came from the top.

"Shove 'em up, Carwood!" he shouted down.

Hall was kneeling on the stage's top, and he was gripping his six-gun. Lin heard the hammer click sharply back. Hall's bloody face and shirt gave him a diabolical appear-

ance, and his hard eyes held cold menace as he glared at Lin.

"Thought yuh'd stop me by havin' yore pals kill me off, eh, Carwood?" he roared. "Go on, quick, and shove up yore paws!"

Lin's arms rose and he eyed Worden Hall disgustedly.

"Don't be a darned old fool, Hall," he advised. "I'm not in with these dirty—"

But a wholly unexpected interruption came. Lin had forgotten the lookout bandit on the other ridge. The sharp crack of the man's rifle came and Hall pitched forward on top of the stage again, his head and hands flopping over the baggage rails and his gun falling into the snow below.

Lin whirled, but only in time to see the outlaw on the ridge go racing away across the desert at furious speed, heading for the foothills a mile away.

Running around the stage, Lin made sure that the outlaw lying there was actually dead; then he darted back to the two roped outlaws and swiftly examined their bindings, making the ropes tighter. The two men lay still, sullenly eyeing him.

He clambered up beside Hall and turned him over on his back. The lookout's bullet had smashed through Hall's other shoulder and Hall was now completely out.

LIN lifted the driver's seat, to see if there was a further supply of bandages, and stopped with a low gasp of astonishment. Several sacks were inside, each full and stamped with the Coyote bank's name!

"Holy smoke!" he exclaimed. "The Chaparral pay roll, what I was to carry down to Chaparral tomorrow! And Hall gave out word, in Coyote, before he left, that he wasn't carryin' nothin' this first trip—just meanin' tuh break a new trail for his stages!"

Things cleared swiftly in his mind as he eyed the sacks. "Bolton and his gang must 've been put wise to Hall's carryin' these sacks," he muttered. "That's always been the way, somehow."

But a deep groan from Hall interrupted his musings and, jerking out the first aid kit, Lin bandaged the unconscious man's wounds as tightly as he dared. Then Lin looked away towards the foothills. Far across the white expanse, a dot was moving rapidly towards one of the canyons. Lin's eyes narrowed.

"That lookout *hombre's* shore bustin' the wind," he muttered. "I bet he'll be bringin' the rest o' the gang fast. Reckon this old race is on again, and the sooner the wiser."

HE bundled the dead outlaw inside the stage, then hoisted each of the two wounded outlaws in, leaving them roped tightly. He laid Hall flat on the stage's top and, using another lariat from one of the saddled horses, tied Hall to the baggage rails. Under Hall's head he shoved his own leather coat.

"Best I kin do for 'im now," he muttered again. "No time tuh lose, and six miles more tuh go."

Leaping to the ground, he ran to Shanks, mounted and raced back to the stage. Using his lariat and Shanks' weight, he dragged aside the two dead team horses, made the leaders take the place of the swings, roped Shanks in the lead and scrambled back to the seat. He lifted the lines and cracked his whip, kicking off the brake.

"Git movin', broncs!" he shouted, and the crack of the long whip sounded like a pistol shot. The team, led by Shanks, dashed away at a run. Lin eyed Shanks' ears and grinned.

"You and me'll win out yet, oldtimer," he promised the horse grimly. "Bein' in the lead thataway, as yuh are, and still carryin' the mail on yore saddle, yuh'll git intuh Chapar-

ral at least one second ahead of this old hearse—and that'll be winnin', on any stop-watch, accordin' tuh Hoyle."

Lin forced the horses into a terrific speed. His gaze swept the white wasteland keenly, anxiously. How soon would that lookout rider come racing back, with the rest of the Bolton gang?

Every minute counted. Away towards the foothills the desert lay white, without a moving object, gleaming under the bright sun. But the icy wind continued, and soon Lin's hands and feet began feeling numb again. But his jaw set like iron and the whip cracked again and again.

MILES swept behind. Then Hall's voice came. Lin glanced around. The going was rough, speed was imperative and Hall's condition bad. Hall was eyeing him suspiciously.

"Headin' for where, Carwood?" he asked.

"For Chaparral, an' hopin' we make it before the rest o' Bolton's gang shows up," Lin yelled back against the wind. "That lookout *hombre* what give yuh that last shot busted the wind for their hangout. Sorry tuh have tuh be slammin' yuh around thisaway, old-timer, but—"

And then he stopped abruptly, for half a dozen horsemen were now racing into view across the white-covered desert.

"And here they come!" Lin yelled.

"Turn me loose," Hall shouted back. "I kin still drive, and *you* cain't handle the team and shoot too. I reckon I been sizin' yuh up plumb wrong, young fella."

Lin dragged the excited speeding team down to a walk, then shoved home the brake. With a grinding of wheels and a loud snorting of the team, the stage careened over another snow-hidden boulder and came to a stop. Holding the lines in one hand, Lin leaned around and, with his hunting knife, cut the ropes holding Hall to the baggage rails.

"All right," he said. "Get grabbin' these lines, Hall, if yuh think yuh can stand it. Quick! Them fellas is comin' hell for leather, and got their guns out now."

Hall crawled into the driver's seat and grabbed the lines. On his bronzed face lay powerful repression, and his eyes were pain-racked. One glance told Lin that he was suffering desperately. A scalp wound, and a bullet through each shoulder!

But there was no time to lose. Lin scrambled back on top of the stage and flattened down, his high-heeled boots pressing against the baggage rails, a gun in each hand.

Another moment and whining lead screeched past Lin's head. The pursuers were now not over two hundred yards away and coming fast. Lin holstered his useless six-guns and jerked out the rifle hanging beside the driver's seat.

As he sent a volley of shots at the oncoming men, they scattered widely, yelling and firing. The careening stage, however destroyed Lin's aim. The roped bandits inside set up fresh howls. Hall was bracing himself firmly and driving skilfully.

AT full speed, the stage swung around a bend in the trail. Shanks was plunging ahead like an engine and with the speed of a deer, leading the excited team, head up and bright mane tossing. The wind was still grippingly cold and Lin beat his hands on the top of the stage after every few shots.

He glanced around at Hall as they made the bend in the road. Fresh blood was soaking Hall's two bandages and Lin knew that the man could not hold out very much longer, at such a gait.

The stage was now following along the base of a fifty-foot cliff, out of sight of the coming outlaws. Lin

eyed it keenly, then yelled to Hall:

"Stop, Hall! Keep the horses here. I'll get up on the cliff. I can't hit nothin' thisaway, top o' yore durned old merry-go-round."

By a hard effort, Hall brought the team to a halt. Lin was off and scrambling up the cliff in an instant. Flat on its edge, he peered over. The outlaws were coming furiously, yelling to one another, driving home their spurs. Lin's rifle spat a stream of flame and men and horses crashed headlong.

ROCKY splinters cut against Lin's face as some of the outlaws returned his fire. He rolled to a new position. For the moment, his fire had stopped them. They dashed behind boulders.

Lin knew that, half a mile ahead, was a horse-trail known as the Navajo Cutoff—a short cut to Chaparral. He had used it often. He shouted down to Hall:

"Cut my hoss loose, Hall, and then get shovin' yore stage for Chaparral like all hell was behind yuh. I'll hold back these skunks for a while."

Hall, haggard of face, smeared with blood, looked up from flashing eyes. He was gripping his gun again.

"An' leave *you* out here tuh do my fightin'?" he yelled.

But a furious burst of firing came from the outlaws and more rock splinters cut against Lin's half-frozen cheeks.

"Hear that?" he shouted back at Hall. "It ain't you or me what counts now. It's the mail and that pay roll money. We gotta make good, and on time. Git movin'. Leave my horse and bust yore team."

He sent another volley of shots at the outlaws' places of concealment. Hall turned Shanks loose, then sped away with the stage at a furious run, swaying on the seat, but with whip cracking like revolver shots.

Lin whistled softly and Shanks tossed up his handsome pinto head and came slowly up the back side of the cliff. Stopping at its base, the horse pricked forward his small ears as though asking Lin a question. As Lin caught a last glimpse of the stage and of Hall's swaying form on the seat, he shook his head anxiously.

"He's shore got grit," he muttered, "even if he is a durned Texan. I'm shore revisin' a heap o' ideas, this trip. Wow!"

His last curt exclamation sprang from a slug which had come too close and he flattened lower on the cliff's edge. Blood started trickling down one cheek, where the splinter had cut deeply. He sent another burst of shots at the outlaws' positions. A man's leg appeared around a rock and Lin fired instantly. The leg jerked out of sight and a wild yell came.

Lin smiled grimly. He sent two more shots that way and darted down to Shanks, vaulted into the saddle and raced away after the stage, keeping the cliff between himself and the outlaws.

He laughed curtly as he heard them still shooting at the cliff. A hundred yards farther on, he climbed another low hill and looked back.

THE outlaws' horses, reins dragging, were drifting about. Several were galloping away toward the foothills. Lin grinned and cocked his rifle.

"Here's where them *hombres* does a heap o' walkin'," he announced.

His rifle cracked twice more and snow flashed up from among the remaining horses. They tossed up their heads excitedly and raced away after the others. Lin chuckled as he ran down and mounted Shanks again.

At a swift gallop, Lin headed for the Navajo Cutoff. He covered the half mile in record time, whirled into the cutoff and drove Shanks upward desperately. Narrow, rising steeply and now snow-packed and slippery, the footing was dangerous.

A single slip, and man and horse would go plunging down to death on the rocks below, but Lin forced the gait recklessly and Shanks went up in a series of gigantic leaps.

On top, Lin looked ahead at Chaparral. The small adobe town formed a bunch of brown blotches against the glistening snow; and, far across the flat, the stage was moving at a wild run, heading straight for the town. Hall's swaying form seemed a mere dot on the driver's seat.

And suddenly the whole idea of the race swept back into Lin's mind and he chuckled again, shot home his spurs and made Shanks belly out at breakneck speed. Down the treacherous trail he flew, then out onto the level.

A FEW minutes more and Lin went dashing past the stage at a run. He let out a yell of delight and waved one hand at Hall. The town was but a short distance ahead.

"I'm beatin' yuh yet, old-timer!" Lin shouted. "I'll be waitin' for yuh in front of the postoffice. Reckon you and me kin tie up together, after all."

He was away like a flash. Hall, his face twisted with pain, managed a little smile as he waved back. Then he lashed at his speeding team. And if that lashing fell short and Hall's arm sank wearily, Lin was too far ahead to notice. But Hall's eyes, as they watched Lin, held rich admiration.

"Some kid, all right!" he muttered. "I reckon him and me *kin* tie up, after this, if I—live!"

Flying down the street of Chaparral a few minutes later, Lin jerked Shanks to a sliding halt before the little postoffice and let out the old mail-rider yell as he tossed the mail-pouches to the waiting postmaster. A crowd of townspeople had assembled, having seen the stage coming and Lin racing ahead of it, and all cheered loudly.

"All out for the mail, folks!" Lin shouted gleefully as he vaulted to the ground. "And I'm ten seconds ahead!"

Down the street came the stage at thundering speed. Before the postoffice, Hall dragged at the lines to halt the excited team, but that he was suffering was plain to all. Men leaped forward, caught the bridles of the team and jerked the animals down to a halt.

It was into Lin's strong arms that Hall fell. Lin carried him inside and laid him on the postmaster's couch, and, a moment later, the old town doctor was bending over Hall anxiously.

As a couple of women came in and started assisting the doctor, Lin went outside and climbed back on the stage, lifted the money sacks out and handed them down to a rather anxious-faced man who came forward. He was the president of Chaparral's little bank. Lin grinned down at him.

"There's all yore dinero, Martin," he said, "and yuh can thank Gawd and Worden Hall. Lucky he was drivin' this old stage today, or them Bolton *hombres* would 've got it all an' be playin' a heap o' poker back in th' hills by now."

As the crowd gathered around, eager to hear the story of the race, Lin told it quickly, giving all the credit to Hall. But, as he finished, he grinned around into the smiling faces about him.

"But I beat the stage, folks, anyway—a full ten seconds ahead. Yuh all seen me."

A SOLEMN-EYED man stepped from the postoffice and came forward, shoving his way through the crowd. As Lin saw his expression, his bright laugh dwindled away. The man was one of Hall's new station keepers.

"Hall's askin' fer yuh, Lin," he said gravely. The crowd eyed him curiously, in silence.

As Lin strode inside, a glance was enough to tell him that Hall, big and

powerful as he was, had given his all in the service of his stage company. A lump rose in Lin's throat. Hall smiled a twisted little smile and held out a hand.

"Carwood," he said huskily and with evident difficulty, "I reckon our race is over, and the outcome don't matter no more, now. But yuh cain't beat stages, son. Yo're buckin' civilization itself, which ain't sense."

"Yes," Lin replied in a low, subdued voice, for Hall's face was taking on a ghastly shade, "guess yo're right, old-timer. Yuh've called my hand, and I'm throwin' in with yuh."

Hall's eyes filled with friendliness and he kept hold of Lin's hand. But his other was pressing over the wound that lookout outlaw had given him.

"Not with—me, son," he replied weakly. "I'm gettin' off at this station, but I'm turnin' my job over tuh *you*. I've just wrote a little note tuh our company, an' they'll take my word fer it. I've told 'em yo're—th' best—doggone man in—th' whole Southwest."

Lin's eyes filmed, for Hall's voice was now but a hoarse whisper, and the blotched bandages told the story.

"Thanks, Hall," Lin murmured, and he gave Hall's fingers a firm squeeze.

Hall's head fell back on the pillow. His arm dropped. The old doctor lifted a blanket to lay over his face. Lin turned slowly away and strode outside, unable to watch that blanket fall over the face of one of the bravest, squarest men he had known.

He walked slowly across to Shanks and patted the sleek neck. The pinto shoved his nose against him and nickered. Then Lin looked around at the men standing about. Some were carrying the dead outlaw and the two roped ones into the jail, under the charge of the town marshal. A posse was clattering away for the scene of the fight. The old peace officer eyed Lin keenly and grinned.

"Yuh look like yuh been clawed by a coupla grizzlies, Lin," he remarked.

Lin's ear was still bleeding, his shirt over one shoulder soaked with blood, and his left sleeve flapped open over the flesh wound he had gotten there, while his face was cut in several places from those flying rock splinters.

"But all them rewards goes tuh *you*, son."

"Not tuh me, Jake," Lin smiled. "To Worden Hall."

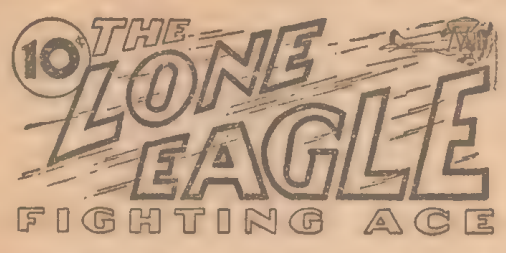
"But Hall's—"

"Yeah, I know, Jake," and Lin's voice was low, "but he's got a wife an' kid up in Coyote, an' they'll be needin' money."

He turned to the men around the stage.

"Boys," he said, "pack the Coyote mail and other stuff on the stage. I'm drivin' it back, come mawnin'. Stages will do all our haulin' hereafter.

"Civilization's come intuh this country, and tuh stay. Hall said so, and he shore knowed. He asked me tuh take his place, which I'm doin'."



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Rough Holsters

Bates leaped into swift action

Two Ornery Polecats Barge in on "Buck" Bates—And He Figures Out a Right Royal Welcome for 'Em When They Return!

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

Author of "The Marshal From Mustang," etc.

BUCK BATES sat on the top rail of his corral fence and worried about how he was going to keep old Silas Warner from kicking him off his ranch when he failed to meet the last payment, which was due the old money lender in another ten days. He idly watched the two riders who came down the trail and pulled up at his corral.

Both the riders were dark-skinned and they bristled with new guns and ornamented holsters. The foremost had small black eyes.

"Are you Bates?" one inquired.

"You named me, stranger."

"I'm the new president of the Ranchers Protective Association, Mr. Bates."

"I'm glad to meet you," Bates re-

plied. "But I never heard o' that outfit."

"You will," the man said. "I'm organizing the ranchers and you'll have to join. Your dues will be fifty dollars a month. You have a week to pay it."

Bates laughed. "Say, if I had that much money I'd start a bank. You're barkin' up the wrong tree."

The man's eyes narrowed. "You're the one that's wrong. You're going to join—and you're going to pay."

Even through his sunburned skin the blood turned Bates' face red. But caution kept his words back. These men were doubly armed. His own gun was inside his house, hanging on a peg. "What is this?" he demanded shortly. "A shakedown?"

"You guessed it, *hombre*," the man confirmed. "You pay your dues and get protection—or else—"

"Else what?"

"If you don't come across, we cut your fences, poison your waterholes and plow your land with a crop of lead. Take your choice."

"YOU know what choice you'll get, don't you?" Bates returned. "You'll maybe get to choose between being hung to an oak or sycamore."

"They won't get their hands on us," the man boasted. "We come to collect when you don't expect us. We have plenty of time. You can't watch every foot of your land and all your waterholes twenty-four hours every day in the year. You just have to keep your money ready until we call for it."

The man's glance took in the corral where Bates' three saddle horses stood. He drew the ornate Colt from its holster at his side and fired before Bates could shout at him. One of the horses fell dead.

"If you'll look, you'll see that I put that bullet right in that white spot on his forehead," the man said coldly. "That's just to show you these guns ain't ornaments." Then with a warning look, the man turned and rode away with his partner.

Early next morning Bates saddled one of his two remaining horses and rode to town to see old Tebo Brown, the sheriff. He found the officer in his cubby-hole in the jail building and told him of the gunmen.

"I'M afraid there's not enough for me to work on," the notoriously lazy officer said. "But if they do poison your water, bring 'em in and I'll throw 'em in jail. Sorry I can't help you."

"It ain't me wantin' help so much," Bates answered disgustedly. "It's that these buzzards will probably start poisoning a lot of waterholes, and you know none of us little ranchers around here can afford to lose a lot of stock. We're almost broke as it is."

The sheriff grunted. "What do you expect me to do? Go ridin' all through the Poke-nose Hills lookin' for them two men? You couldn't find 'em in a year in them hills."

"I know that, but you could come out to my place and lie in wait until they show up again. I don't want to have to kill to protect myself."

"Sorry!" the sheriff said sharply. "I'm too busy."

The young rancher looked about, searched his mind for some way to convince the officer that something should be done. The litter of papers on the untidy desk caught his eye, and something he saw gave him a sudden inspiration.

"I want to make up a telegram," he said. "Can I use this piece of paper?"

"Sure, take it," the sheriff grunted.

The young rancher scribbled something on the back of the paper, thrust it into his pocket and left the sheriff's office. He rode out of town before he pulled out the piece of paper and examined it. He paid no

attention to the meaningless words he had written on the back, but he carefully studied the type matter on the front, where the word "Lefty" had caught his eye as the paper lay on the officer's desk.

IT was a police dodger, informing the reader in large black letters that the town of Denver would pay five thousand dollars reward for the apprehension of Jose Garcia, alias "Lefty" Garcia, dead or alive. He, together with one Tony Lopez, were wanted for the attempted robbery of the Second National Bank in that city, and for the murder of two employees in the course of the attempted holdup.

Bates studied the picture on the circular. It was the president of the ranchers' organization he was looking at.

It was a week later when the two crooks rode up and dismounted at Bates' corral and stood before him belligerently. Bates made no move to greet them, but stood leaning easily against the corral fence. He appeared not to notice that the two men separated and that one was on either side of him.

"Well," the leader demanded, "you got them dues ready?"

"Nope," Bates answered. "I reckon we can get along out here without joining your association."

The man's face flushed with anger. "Say, listen here, you fool. Don't you know what you're going up against? Did you ever hear of people being killed for not kicking in?"

"Sure, I've heard of it," Bates answered quietly, still leaning against the fence. "Like that man and girl you killed when you tried to rob the bank in Denver, wasn't it, Lefty?"

Surprise drained the blood from the Mexican's face, but he instinctively went for his gun, even as he glanced significantly at his partner.

But Bates had counted on the slim seconds that the surprise would give him. He leaped into action as he spoke.

While the Mexicans jerked at guns in rough new holsters, his own gun barked twice, once to the left and once to the right.

The Mexicans' guns were out when they fell. But the stiffness of their flapping holsters had slowed them up—fatally.

BATES was in the office of Sheriff Tebo Brown, and his wagon was outside. "I got the bodies of the two men mentioned on this circular," he told the indolent officer, after he managed to awaken him from his nap.

"What two men?" the sheriff asked. The young rancher unfolded the piece of paper.

"The two men mentioned on this circular you gave me to send a telegram on. I got the telegram all written on the back of it, so all you have to do is to go down to the station and send it to the police.

"I wish you'd do it now, so I'll have my reward in time to pay old Silas Warner the money I owe him. I have to buy a new saddle horse, too. If that Garcia hadn't shot my horse, I don't reckon him and his partner would be dead now."

"How come?" the sheriff asked.

"He shot the animal with his left hand. And this paper calls the man Lefty. That's what got me convinced I had been talking to the bank robber. I figured I could outshoot him when I saw he and his partner had new rough holsters they hadn't greased."

"You're sure lucky," the sheriff said enviously. "I'd sure like to have had the chance to get that reward."

Bates started to answer, then changed his mind.

"Yep, I guess it was luck," he said, and let it go at that.

RAMBLING RANNY

Tim Farrell, a Fighter from His Boot-Heels Up, Mixes It with a Gang of Desperate Outlaws at the Cowtown of Redcliffs

---

A Complete Novelette

By CLAUDE RISTER

Author of "Hot Lead," "Girl from Wyoming," etc.

CHAPTER I

"Help! Robbery!"

IT was one of the most brutal, cold-blooded crimes ever committed in the West. The stage came into the mountain town of Redcliffs two hours late, due to rainy weather and bad roads. A small Wells Fargo strongbox was handed down to the clerk. The stage then rolled on into the dreary rain that was falling.

The scrawny, tousle-haired, bespectacled express clerk did not become aware that any one had entered the small lobby room behind him until he heard a muffled voice order: "Put 'em up, fellow!"

The little man had just set the strongbox onto a table. At sound of the sinister order he spun around, stiffening erect as he whirled. A thin hand darted to the gun which rested against his right hip, but he did not draw. Three slickered and masked men, with hats pulled low, were covering him through the cagework. To the startled clerk the muzzles of those guns looked like yawning cannons.

He thought wildly. The men must have been hiding behind the depot when the stage had arrived, for he had seen no one about when he had gone out. The rain had kept the usual stage meeters uptown. In the strongbox was some five thousand dollars in currency, consigned to the Bank of Redcliffs.

THE banker had meant to meet the stage and immediately take over the money. He had made two trips to the depot that night, but had returned to his office until the stage passed the bank, after leaving the station. Then he would hurry right down.

The agent raised his hands. The leader of the holdup trio spoke again, his voice coming slightly muffled from behind the bandanna which was pulled up to his eyes.

"Put down your left hand, unbuckle your cartridge belt; then step

As Rambling watched, he saw a pistol leap from the man's hip

over there and open the office door." was the next command.

The clerk obeyed. He had been so startled that, just then, he could think of nothing but obedience. The three men entered the office. "Give me the key to the box," ordered the leader.

The little man became suddenly aggressive. "You can't get away with

this! I know you in spite of the mask and the slicker! You're the only person besides the banker and me who knew the stuff was coming in tonight! You overheard us talking about it when you entered the bank in that cat-footing way of yours yesterday."

"Shut up, and give me the key!"

"I WON'T! I'll die first! I'll yell for help! I'll—"

A hand shot out and seized the scrawny throat. A six-gun rose and fell in a terrible blow. The little man sighed, and collapsed as if every bone in his body suddenly had turned to marrow.

They knelt by him; hurriedly searched pockets. One of them found a bunch of keys. He took them and sprang to the strongbox. The next moment it was open. The leader thrust in a hand, took out several packets of bills, and shoved them into a small canvas sack. He wheeled, sprang to the human form that lay on the floor, and knelt.

"I think he's dead, but just to make sure—" he struck another crunching, sickening blow with the heavy pistol. "It's better that way," he muttered, as he rose quickly and started moving with cat-like strides toward the door that admitted to the small lobby. "He had recognized me, all right, and if I hadn't killed him—"

He froze, cursed softly. The three men stepped out into the lobby and turned toward the front door. A chunky, gray man in a black raincoat and a soft black hat had just entered the depot. He, too, stopped abruptly.

As the banker saw the drawn guns in the hands of the three desperadoes; the canvas sack which the one in front was holding; then the human form sprawled on the office floor, he understood. With a wild yell of: "Help! Robbers!" he sent a hand darting under his raincoat and to the butt of a gun contained in a shoulder holster.

It was a foolish move. There was a crash of gunfire. The chunky banker went backward as if he had been kicked in the chest by a mule. He flopped heavily upon the wet ground and lay still, beneath the melancholy drizzle that was coming out of the black heavens.

Tim Farrell, better known as the "Rambling Ranny," rode into Redcliffs just as the express clerk was being held up. He was less than forty yards from the stage office when the cry of: "Help! Help! Robbers! Robbers!" and then the blast of pistol shots rang out.

Rambling yanked his mount to a stop. "Gosh!" he exclaimed, as he saw a man pitch out of an open doorway and flop to the earth.

Rambling Ranny socked steel to his mount and went spattering toward the stage depot. Three men came dashing out of the building. All held drawn guns. Rambling pulled his own six-shooter from under his yellow slicker and yelled:

"Drop that bag an h'ist 'em, you coyotes!"

THE three men stopped, but not to comply with his shouted command. He saw three flashes of fire. The next instant his mount was crumpling in front. He kicked his feet free of the stirrups and took a tumble. As it ended he saw that his pony was still down—shot in the head, he guessed. He sent a glance back to the stage depot. The bandits were just disappearing around a corner.

Robbers! Murderers! They'd killed his horse, too! He'd show 'em! Scrambling to his feet, he stretched his long legs in a run.

Although only twenty-three years old, Tim Farrell, the Rambling Ranny, was six feet tall, weighed a hundred and eighty pounds, and was

a fighter from his boot-heels up. He had experienced much of Western adventure.

Yellow slicker swishing, he reached the corner around which the three-masked bandits had disappeared. He paused, expecting to hear a thudding of hoofs, and perhaps to see a trio of riders jump into sight, but no such things occurred. Strange; he had felt certain the robbers were running for horses, hidden in the darkness behind the stage depot. He ran on, boots clopping.

AT the back corner he paused again and peeped around the angle. He did not want to go charging right into three waiting gunmen —but no one was there. He went on to the next corner, from there to the front, thus finishing a circle of the small building; still no sign of the bandits.

He sprang to the door and threw just one glance within; saw the dead agent sprawled in the office; then he wheeled.

The banker's shout, and the gunfire, had brought men stampeding out of lighted buildings all up and down the street. They now were running toward the stage depot, their booted feet pounding on board sidewalks and spatting on the wet earth. There were excited voices. The dim lights along the street showed the town swarming with human figures.

The two strings of buildings which constituted the town of Redcliffs were situated on a mighty bench that was a mile long and two hundred yards wide. One row of the frame structures stood with backs near cliffs of red rock. Out beyond the other row, the bench fell sheer for a hundred feet to a river that just now was a snarling, dangerous flood.

There was open space some ten yards wide on each side of the stage depot, but from those spaces, buildings stretched away in two directions. The depot was near the middle of the town.

For just a fleeting moment the Rambling Ranny turned the situation over in his mind, and then he bawled to the gathering crowd:

"There's been robbery and double murder! Three men run behind the depot, but they ain't there now. They didn't have hosses, so they must've run along behind the buildin's, one way or the other. Scatter and hunt for 'em."

Some of the men ran on past him and to the depot, curious to view the scene of death and robbery. Others scattered and searched like eager bird-dogs, without knowing for whom they were looking. They only got in one another's way, and confused the issue.

After a moment's excitement, though, they began to realize the folly of what they were doing, and to gather around the cowboy for further information. There were miners, prospectors, waddies, townsmen, and riffraff in that gathering. They all listened intently to the Rambling Ranny's words.

The group was standing within a blurred circle of light that emanated from a row of hooded lanterns along the porch edge of the town's main dive. A tall slender man, wearing a green and red checkered mackinaw, a corduroy cap, store-bought pants and boots, crowded to the forefront and studied Rambling closely.

HIS blue eyes were hard. There was a suspicious smirk on the thin-lipped mouth beneath his long, thin, slightly Roman nose.

"How do we know you aren't one of the robbers yourself, fellow? Who are you, anyway?" he asked.

"I'm Tim Farrel, from Black Mesa and points west. Sorter driftin'. Got into town just in time to witness the things I've done told you about. You talk plumb loco, feller. I can prove

by describin' the contents of the saddle pockets and the roll on the cayuse which was killed, that the hoss belonged to me."

"But how do we know said animile was killed while chargin' the bandits?" put in another man. He wore a shabby old Stetson, a yellow slicker, and cowboy boots and spurs. He had a short stubble of black beard on his face. His eyes were squinty, black, and mean. There was a deep scar along his right cheekbone—probably from a knife cut. He grinned wisely, showing a gapped row of teeth.

"THE cowboy told the truth," some one said in a tone of authority, and the man who had spoken came shoving through the crowd. He was small, with extremely bowed and thin legs, but with broad shoulders. His black Stetson was cocked on one side of his head. There was a sheriff's badge pinned on the front of his leather jacket.

"I reckon I was about the first fella to get onto the street after the shootin' started," he went on. "I saw the waddy's horse flop, and three men run behind the depot. I follered around, hopin' to cut them off, but I reckon the scamps run in the other direction." The little officer had a cool, decisive manner of speaking.

"I figure the bandits are in this town right now; maybe in this very crowd," said the tall, thin-faced man who had expressed suspicion of Rambling Ranny. "The fact that they didn't have horses proves they expected to make an easy haul; then sneak quietly back up into town and mix with the rest of us."

"Yeah," Rambling Ranny deduced shrewdly, "and I figure the reason they chose to stay here instead of skeedaddlin', was because they're well-known characters in this yere town. Runnin' away would have branded 'em as the guilty ones."

"Smart reasoning, cowboy," said the calm little sheriff. "Same for you, Stinley," to the tall man in the mackinaw and the laced boots. "But I'll round them up. They can't climb the cliffs on the north of this bench, and they can't cross the river on the south.

"I'm sending parties of riders east and west to see that they don't escape by following the bench. And I'm goin' to search the whole town clean."

He turned again to Rambling. "Would you know the three bandits if you saw them again?"

Rambling shook his head. "No, I wouldn't, and I was right clos't. They all wore gray hats, yaller slickers, and bandanner masks.

"About half the men in this yere town have gray hats and yaller slickers, I reckon."

"Yeah, that's right."

"But there's one way we might identify them three snakes."

"How?"

Something glittered in the pale light. A knife came hurtling straight toward the cowboy's throat.

CHAPTER II

Three Skulking Riders

RAMBLING RANNY saw the glint of steel just in time to jerk his head. The sharp point clicked against a small buckle on the neck of his slicker and was deflected. The knife went whisking on, to thump against a hitch rail; then it fell to the wet ground.

It took every one just a few seconds to grasp what had happened. Rambling's jerk of the head had been more instinctive than voluntary. He turned, strode to the hitch rack, stooped, and picked up the heavy knife.

"Somebody tried to kill him to

keep him from talking!" yelled an excited voice in the crowd.

"Where'd that sticker come from?" barked the sheriff. "Get the bird that throwed it, men!"

The next instant there was confusion—rushing, pushing, milling. No one knew exactly from what place in the darkness the knife had come. Moreover, there had been time for the thrower to slip away, or to shift his position on the outskirts of the crowd.

THE search was soon abandoned, for the simple reason that again no one knew for whom he was looking. The little bowlegged sheriff came back to Rambling.

"What was it you were goin' to tell me?"

The tall waddy grinned, his long, bronzed face wrinkling. "Nothin' as important as that there knife thrower feared, I reckon.

"I just aimed to say that we might identify 'em by their tracks, if we can find any."

A search for tracks was made. There were many footprints—too many.

Searchers had tramped everywhere, and there was no way of distinguishing the tracks of the robbers from the others.

The sheriff sent men east and west along the bench; then he made a thorough search of the town. But there was nothing to search for except the loot, and there were almost innumerable places where it might be hidden. Every man in town was frisked that night, but finally the law had to admit defeat—for the time being, at least.

The monotonous drizzle ceased at midnight. The next morning broke clear.

The sheriff, in appreciation of the Rambling Ranny's courage in attempting to capture the three desperadoes single-handed, had taken up a collection among the men in town that night, and had bought the cowboy another horse.

Bright and early the next morning, Rambling was ready to resume his journey.

As he came out of Hong Wah's restaurant and went to the hitch rail to get his new mount he saw the tall, thin-faced man, Stinley, walking toward him from a saloon across the street.

"Hey, cowboy, just a minute."

Rambling waited. Stinley was a handsome man, in a hard way. He smiled as he came up. "I want to apologize to you," he said, and held out a hand:

"You were a stranger, and naturally I was suspicious."

Rambling was by habit a good-natured ranny.

He shook a hand that had the grip and the coldness of steel and laughed the matter off.

Stinley was a very affable man. He owned the little saloon out of which he had just come.

He invited the cowboy over to have a few drinks.

Rambling declined, since he had just eaten breakfast. He reckoned he would be riding on.

"Where bound, cowboy?" Stinley's voice and smile were engaging.

"Down Twin Rivers way."

"Yeah? By way of Wildhorse Junction?"

RAMBLING nodded. The other man's steely blue eyes sparkled. "Then I want you to drop in on mother and dad," he grinned. "They own a little spread down there, the Slash S. They'll be tickled to death to see you, if you just tell 'em you know me."

"I'll be right glad to stop in on 'em. Mighty kind of you to mention it, Mr. Stinley."

"Two very fine old people," the saloon man declared softly, as he

smiled and wagged his head in a reminiscent way. "None better in the world. I—gosh!"

He snapped a finger and looked startled.

"I just remember that day after tomorrow is mother's birthday. I've never missed sending her something, and I know she's going to be disappointed." He sighed. "I been plumb forgetful. Would it be too much trouble—"

"If you'd like, Mr. Stinley, I'd be plumb proud to deliver that gift to yore maw."

"Would you?" He was eager, relieved; again his eyes were shining. "Then wait in my saloon. I'll shop around and see if I can't find something."

HE hurried away. Rambling went into the little saloon. He found just two people there: a Mexican bartender, and a bleary-eyed loafer. He sat down at a card table and dealt "sol" until Stinley returned.

"It's mighty kind of you to do this," the saloon man effused as he tendered a package. Rambling assured him again that it was no trouble at all.

A few minutes later the cowboy was riding out of town, with the package bulking in his warbag, and with Stinley's smile of good fellowship and appreciation still bright in his mind.

Had the Rambling Ranny not been possessed of very sharp eyes, he perhaps would not have noticed three riders who were skulking along through the breaks like wolves on the prowl; but several years of adventuring had taught the lanky young waddy to keep ever on the alert, even at times when no danger at all was expected.

He was about ten miles out of Redcliffs, and moving leisurely along through rough country.

He had chanced to swing a roving glance toward the east, just in time to catch a glimpse of the three horsemen.

He pulled up and watched for their reappearance, but he did not see them again. Obviously they were keeping close to cover. Why? As he asked himself the question, he thought of the three bandits who had committed the murders and the robbery in Redcliffs.

"It may be them, and then again it may not," he told himself. "Anyway, they're shore ridin' like they don't want nobody to see 'em."

He touched his mount lightly with a spur and rode on. He was cautious, for the direction the three men were following would bring them to the trail he was traveling. If they were the bandits, and should they see him, they might try to get revenge for his action against them at the stage depot.

As he neared the vicinity where, according to his reckoning, the course of the riders would have brought them to the trail, he became still more alert. He rode with his reins held very high, his right hand resting on the butt of his six-gun, his gray eyes glancing in every direction.

All about him were boulders, cutwashes, bushes, scrub trees. To his right stood a tree-dotted hill. Three hundred yards to his left was a barren one, with austere cliffs and snaggled rimrocks.

"IT shore is an ideal place for an ambush," he thought uneasily. There were thousands of places where gunmen might be in concealment.

A hundred yards farther along the trail, he came to an abrupt halt. He had come around a rocky point, and onto a little boulder-strewn flat. Twenty yards ahead of him were three riders, sitting their mounts and waiting.

CHAPTER III

Revenge Trail

ONE of the men was Stinley. Another was the mean-eyed, scar-faced fellow who, like Stinley, had cast suspicion upon Rambling immediately after the holdup and killings in Redcliffs. The third member of the trio was a medium-sized dark man with pudgy features.

"Hello, cowboy," Stinley greeted amiably. He smiled and raised a hand Indian fashion. "We've been waiting for you." The three men spurred their horses and came forward at a trot.

"Yeah? How come?"

Still smiling, the saloon man said: "After you left town I dropped around to the postoffice and found a letter from my mother. She and dad are coming to see me, and arrive tomorrow—so I thought I'd get back that gift I was sending her. I know of a shortcut through the breaks, and so I took it, and waited for you."

The man spoke with the same affability that he had shown toward Rambling Ranny in town that morning, but this time the effect upon the cowpoke was entirely different. He sensed trickery behind the man's smile and friendly speech.

"Lot o' trouble to go to, just to recover a trifle, ain't it, Mister?"

"But it isn't a trifle. It's a hand-worked, silver spangled Mexican shawl that cost me fifty dollars. There's not another one like it to be had in the country."

"Did you figure you'd need help to get it back?" Rambling glanced suggestively at the man's two companions.

Again Stinley laughed lightly. "These boys, Gap Garner,"—nodding toward the scarfaced man—"and Mike Nuggert are cowboys belonging to this range. They're out hunting strays. I caught up with them a mile back there, and we rode on together."

The Rambling Ranny's brain was working fast, thinking things that had not occurred to him before. Stinley's saloon was only four doors west of the Redcliffs stage depot. Supposing that these three men were the killer-bandits: it would have been an easy matter for them to run to the back door of the saloon, through the building, and mingle with the men on the street.

There would have been no one except the bartender in the place at the time; for the patrons, if any, would have bolted out at sound of the shooting and the other excitement. As for the bartender, he might have been a party to the plot.

To be sure, Stinley had been wearing a corduroy cap and a mackinaw when Rambling first had seen him, while the robbers had all worn yellow slickers and gray hats; but then, Stinley might have paused in the back room of his dive long enough to change his outer attire.

WHAT if the package contained the loot? The thought caused a peculiar prickling along the waddy's backbone. The robbers might have slipped him the stuff to take out of town for them, because they feared that they were under suspicion and could not get out with it themselves.

The cowboy was above suspicion, since the sheriff had seen him battling the desperadoes.

The entire course of reasoning had flashed through Rambling's head within an instant, as he had looked steadily at the saloon man. To test his suspicions he said: "I'd shore like to have a look at that fifty dollar shawl, Mister, if you don't mind unwrappin' it."

Stinley showed annoyance. "I'd like to, cowboy, but I took consider-

able pains in doing it up. And I'm in a hurry to get back to town. Give it to me, please."

He rode a little closer. From narrowed eyes and beneath the brim of his Stetson, as he licked a cigarette, Rambling noted that the scarfaced Gap and the beetle-browed Mike had laid hands on their guns. He decided on a still bolder play to test his suspicions:

"IT might interest you to know, Mr. Stinley, that I've done took a look at that there little gift of yorn, and that it ain't a shawl a-tall, although it might be used to buy one."

Stinley's thin face went granite hard. The blue eyes gleamed. The mouth pinched tightly and the point of the long, thin, sharp pointed nose paled.

So interested was Rambling in observing the man's reactions, that he neglected for just an instant to watch the other two men from a corner of his eyes. Beetle browed, black mustached Mike Nuggert flipped up a gun and fired right across his lap.

Rambling's new mount, a half-broken bronc, snorted and wheeled to the left. The tall young cowpoke reeled from his saddle. He pitched off head first, turned over, and flopped heavily on his back. His spurs buried themselves heel deep in the rain-soaked ground.

"Catch that bronc!" barked Stinley. "The package is in the warbag!"

The horse had started trotting away, with reins looped over the saddle horn. The three men drove with their spurs and plunged after the animal.

In their precipitate eagerness they excited the bronc still more, and it broke into a gallop.

They finally hemmed in the runaway animal and captured it, three hundred yards from the place where it had started its flight. Stinley tore the warbag from the saddle, opened it, and emptied its contents upon the ground.

"Ah-h!" he sighed in satisfaction, as he snatched the neatly wrapped package which he had given to Rambling early that morning. "Now let's ride."

"Whut about thet Rambling Ranny feller?" queried Gap. "Hadn't we better go back an' make shore of his finish?"

"No, we'd better be burning the breeze. The sheriff followed me out of town, I tell you. Suspected us. Shrewd as a fox, that little John Law. I dodged him before I met you fellows. He might have been within hearing distance of that shot, though. The quicker we unwind a lot of miles between us and this place, the better."

They socked spurs to their horses and went riding straight toward a giant mountain range that stood to eastward.

LONG-LEGGED Tim Farrell sat up and gazed, frog-eyed about him. He put up big, bony hands and felt his face. It was a little numb to his touch. The hands moved on to his head. One of them removed his wide Stetson, while the other explored an aching spot on the scalp. He found a raw gash.

"Creased," he muttered bitterly, as his senses cleared, "the dirty, cowardly snakes!"

He got slowly to his feet, flexed arms and legs, worked his shoulders, rubbed the back of his head. He found a knot back there. It was that bump, more than the shock of the bullet, which had knocked him cold, he figured. He looked around for his bronc; saw the sorrel, bald-faced animal standing three hundred yards away.

He muttered further imprecations against the three men when he saw

what had been the contents of his warbag, now piled upon the wet ground.

"Them birds are the bandits all right," he mumbled.

As he recovered his duffle, he got madder and madder. When he swung into the saddle his long jaw was hard, and his gray eyes were like streaks of hot steel. "The tricky coyote," he thought bitterly. "Played me for a fool! Well, they ain't nobody can make a monkey out o' me and get away with it! Leastwise, not plumb easy, they can't!"

He straddled leather and took up the trail, moving as fast as he could without losing the tracks.

"I'm gonna catch up with them snakes if I have to follow 'em plumb to hellingone," he swore as he galloped along. "When I do, there shore is goin' to be some lead chuckin'."

CHAPTER IV

Ambush!

IT WAS obvious that the bandits feared pursuit, for they took elaborate pains to hide their trail. They rode over rocks, and along creeks made by the late fall rain. They doubled and they twisted; but that grim Nemesis, the Rambling Ranny, was not fooled.

At midday the cowboy halted for a snack from his small food supply, and then he pushed on. He was entering the mountains now. The weather was threatening once more—not rain, this time, but snow. Little gray clouds were flurrying about the skies.

All during the afternoon the clouds kept gathering, until the sky was a leaden gray vault. There now was a steady breeze from the north, and it cut to the marrow. Rambling halted long enough to get out his sheepskin lined coat and don it. Two hours later it began to snow; a vague, solemn gloom started to gather.

Once he sighted the three men in the distance, just for an instant. He did not know whether or not they had seen him. "This yere mountain blizzard will force 'em to hole up somewheres for the night," he reasoned grimly. "I'll find their camp, and there'll be a reckonin'. They can't make a monkey outa me; no sir.

"Besides, I want to take that there express loot back to Redcliffs. I'd hate to think I was partly responsible for its loss."

HE became extra careful as he came onto the edge of a long up-slanted valley, cradled high within the mountains. His keen gray eyes flicked here and there, scanning clumps of bushes and snow clad hummocks. His bridle reins rested looped over his saddle horn. His rifle was slanted across the pommel of his saddle.

Suddenly the expected happened. A shot cracked out. A bullet whiffed through the falling snow. It raked the back of Rambling's saddle and went droning away. He had glimpsed a movement behind a boulder and had swung his mount just in time to escape being hit.

Rambling jumped his bronc into a clump of aspens, flung himself from the saddle. He crawled to the edge of the thicket and squatted behind an outcrop of rock that slanted up through the earth's crust. He was just in time to see a rider vanish into a growth of jackpines that streaked down a slope, three hundred yards away. Realizing that the deathtrap had failed, the rifleman who had stayed behind to ambush him was hurrying to rejoin the other two killers.

Rambling hurried back to his bronc. Forking leather, he spurred out of the aspen thicket and resumed

his trailing. It was a dangerous game he was playing—and the advantage was all with the desperadoes. Not only did they outnumber him three to one; they could lay an ambush for him anywhere along the trail.

He realized this clearly; still he would not give up.

NIGHT settled quickly, a night that was wild, ghostly, awful. Wind moaned through the pines, causing stark needles and boughs to crackle. The snow drove and swirled fantastically. But there was a full moon behind the clouds, and so despite the leaden skies and the flying snow, the white earth gave up a weird brightness that enabled the cowboy to see the tracks of the three horses quite plainly. He pressed stubbornly on.

Rambling came to a long, curving hill across which the wind drove fiercely. Here the tracks disappeared—drifted out.

He circled widely, but it was no use. The trail had vanished. The barren hilltop was far-reaching, and there was no telling in what direction the bandits had turned. He didn't know which way to go next.

He rode at random for another hour; then the increasing violence of the blizzard warned him that he had better seek shelter for the night. Already both he and his bronc were shivering.

He rode down into a deep vast canyon and began skirting its north slope, seeking some place where he and his horse might find shelter. He traveled for perhaps half a mile, and then pulled up, exultation tingling in his heart. Dimly discernible in the snow were the tracks of three horses.

Luck had turned in his favor. He had stumbled upon the trail of the bandits.

For yet another half hour he rode, and then, rounding a wooded spur, he saw a light. Pressing on, he soon found that it came from a log cabin. The robbers had put up with some one, or else they had holed up in an abandoned mountain shack.

Rambling followed a draw until he was within fifty yards of the house; then he dismounted and took down his lariat. If he captured the bandits, he would need the rope for tying.

He left his bronc under the lee of a sheltering bluff and went skulking toward the log shack. As he moved along he looked for the horses of the desperadoes, but they were not in sight. They might be in one of the several cliff pockets that loomed a hundred yards east of the house, or in some near-by thicket. Well, after all, he was not particularly interested in the horses, but in their owners.

He stole to a window and looked in. His heart jumped, then throbbed heavily. Inside were four men: the three he had trailed, and the Mexican bartender whom he had seen in Stinley's saloon early that morning.

A FIRE was roaring in a broad fireplace, shedding light and warmth into the single room. The windows were unblanketed. Evidently, the desperadoes were pretty sure of themselves. They were seated cross-legged about a saddle blanket, spread on the floor. At a side of the blanket a candle burned.

Stinley was methodically thumbing bills from a packet held in his left hand. As he pitched them one by one onto a little pile of greenbacks, he counted aloud. Rambling Ranny watched, fascinated, forgetful of the snow and the permeating cold.

"Exactly five thousand," Stinley announced after a moment. "Twenty-five hundred for me; a thousand each for Mack and Gap, and five hundred for you, Garcias."

The ex-bartender, a short, very

brown Mexican with beady eyes and a flat, clean-shaven face, protested violently. He wanted a bigger split.

"All you did was keep your mouth shut," Stinley told him sharply. "We took all the chances. Take it or leave it." He threw a few bills in front of Garcias.

THE Mexican looked at them, his features working in rage. He hissed something. His wiry body leaned forward. His arm whipped down. A knife went hurtling.

Stinley's agile body swerved aside, and the knife flew past him. A pistol snapped from his right hip and bellowed. There was a sobbing kind of sigh. Garcias sat weaving, head hanging, while crimson beads dropped from a red spot on his right cheek bone.

Again Stinley's revolver spoke. The Mexican went backward to the floor, as if jerked by the hair of his head.

Just a moment's silence, while all stared at the grotesquely twisted form, and then Stinley laughed unnaturally. "We didn't need him any more. You boys can split the five hundred."

He rose to his feet: "Get that out of here," he ordered harshly, and pointed to the dead man.

Rambling Ranny turned his attention to his lariat. He shook out a loop. "When them fellas leave the house with that body, I'll sneak around and rope one of 'em," he planned swiftly. "I'll use my six-gun on the other 'un, then wait and take care of Stinley as he comes bustin' out."

But the two men did not leave the cabin. Gap opened the door. He and Mack dragged the body across the room and callously flung it out into the darkness and the snow.

"Hard *hombres,*" thought Rambling. "Dirty, murderin' snakes! Ain't fitt'n to live! I'm goin' in there and get 'em!"

But halfway around the cabin he paused. Those three killers would never surrender without a fight. If he flung open the door and called upon them to surrender, they would go for their guns. He might get one or two of them, but he was almost certain to be drilled before he could down them all.

"Use discreeshun, cowboy; use discreeshun," he counseled himself silently.

"Let's have some poker," he heard Stinley suggest.

"Now that's an idee," came the rasping voice of Gap. "But hadn't we better blanket our hosses before we start? We'd be in a bad spot if they froze to death."

"They'll be all right. They're well sheltered in that little cliff pocket, over there to the east of the house. Come on; let's cut for deal."

"Is th-a-at so!" Rambling Ranny thought, as he stood flattened against a wall of the house. "Well, *hombres,* you're in for the surprise of your dirty lives."

CHAPTER V

A Fierce Struggle

SLIPPING to a front corner of the house, Rambling Ranny looked past the angle. Lying grotesquely in front of the door was the bulk of the murdered Garcias, rapidly being covered with a shroud of snow. As he stared at it, the ranny shuddered slightly from a chill that came not entirely of the blizzard.

Standing there in the eerie, silent storm, he tried to think of some shrewd plan of attack. If he could only manage to get at the men one at a time! Desperate lead slingers though they were, he was confident of his ability to take care of himself against any of them in single combat.

Stinley unexpectedly solved the

question for him. He heard the man say:

"Before we start the poker, we'd better go out and scare up some firewood. We'll probably be at the game for a long time, and we'll need a good, big fire for light as well as warmth.

"This candle is pretty dim, and I'm afraid you boys might slip something over on me."

THERE were chuckles; then a scraping of footsteps. The men were moving toward the door. Flattened against the wall, Rambling thought swiftly. If the three men scattered away in front of the house, he would escape discovery, but if any one went behind it, his tracks would be noticed.

He drew his six-gun. "Anyway," he thought, "with surprise in my favor, I can get in the first shot, which will leave the odds only two to one."

He heard the door open; heard the men step out; heard Stinley laugh shortly as he kicked Garcia's body. The other two men chuckled at the grisly joke.

Rambling went rigid. A crunching of snow told that one of the three men was coming his way. He jerked into a crouch and pointed his six-shooter toward the corner, ready to fan the hammer the instant that the human form appeared from behind it.

"I'll gun him out; then spring past the corner and start throwin' lead at the other two," he thought swiftly.

"Hey, fellows," Stinley's voice called, "let's go over into that little patch of timber. We'll likely find plenty of wood there."

The approaching footsteps turned away. Rambling Ranny relaxed. After a moment he removed his wide brimmed Stetson and peeped. He saw the three men tramping away through the snow, heading toward a splotch of trees that stood fifty yards in front of the cabin.

One of them turned aside, calling as he did so: "Hey, look! Here's a nice, big chunk. About all a feller can tote at one load. I'll grab her and go back." It was Gap who had spoken.

Rambling slipped quickly past the corner and went springing toward the open door, carrying the drawn gun in his right hand, the coiled lariat in his left. Just two tracks he made in front of the house; then he was stepping in those left by the man who had come almost to the corner.

He was not going to leave his trail pointing straight indoors.

He slipped swiftly inside the cabin; then wheeled and looked back past an edge of the doorframe. No, he had not been seen. Gap was just straightening up and turning, after having lifted the big chunk of wood. The other two men were going on toward the black splotch of timber.

RAMBLING shoved his Colt into its holster, then ran out a small loop from his coiled lariat. With the noose held poised, he waited. He had elected to use the rope, in preference to clubbing with his gun, because he feared that if he struck with the heavy Colt, he might crush Gap's skull. The Rambling Ranny was not a man to take human life when killing could be avoided in any manner possible.

Crunch! Crunch! Crunch! came footsteps. A booted foot clumped upon the threshold. The rim of a Stetson slid into view past the doorframe.

Gap entered, hugging the big chunk of wood in his arms. Rambling, with a downward whip of his right arm, slapped his loop over the man's head; then jerked hard. He snatched the desperado's six-gun from its holster and swiftly flung it

away. Gap dropped his burden. It boomed to the floor. He tried to voice a cry, but it was strangled. His hands flew to his throat, but a strong hand was on his collar. Another was pulling the noose still tighter. "Don't make a fight," a voice hissed, "or I'll choke you to death!"

Western outlaws are not in the habit of surrendering without a struggle. The man fought desperately, despite the fact that he was being choked blue in the face; fought until his tongue lolled.

With both hands clawing at the rope he flung himself this way and that; butted so vigorously that Rambling became uneasy he might break away, or at least relieve the stricture at his throat sufficiently to voice a warning shout.

To play safe, the waddy jerked his six-gun from its holster and rapped the man sharply across the top of the head.

Gap crumpled without uttering a sound.

Rambling listened for a moment to the man's stentorian breathing. Then he quickly hogtied and gagged his prisoner.

He dragged the unconscious man into a front corner of the room, covered him with riding equipment; then wheeled back.

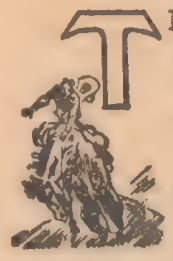
A KICK of one big boot, and the candle went skittering, to strike a wall and go out. Now there was only a faint light in the cabin. The fire had burned down. Its dull glow reached only a little way beyond the hearth.

Rambling picked up the chunk of wood and placed it beside the hearth. He found Gap's six-gun; then with a weapon in each bony fist he sprang back to the pile of riding equipment and waited.

No sooner had he got set, than he again heard a crunch-crunch-crunching of snow.

CHAPTER VI

"H'ist 'em, Coyotes!"



THERE was a mumbling of voices. Plump! went a booted foot upon the doorstep. A form loomed in the opening. Mack, and then Stinley, came in. Each was carrying a load of wood.

Rambling now was bent over the pile of equipment, as if intent upon getting something from a saddle pocket. In reality, though, he was looking back between spread legs, at the two men. His hands, and the guns they held, were shoved down behind a saddle that rested on edge.

The two men looked around and found him as they entered, but there in the dark end of the room his form was but a blur. They mistook him for Gap, just as he had hoped they would.

"Well, Gap, what happened to the candle?" inquired Mack, as he started toward the fireplace. Stinley turned to kick the door shut.

Now was Rambling's time, before the men put down their wood. Suddenly he spun around, crouched low, a leveled six-shooter in each hand. "H'ist 'em, coyotes!" he commanded in a voice that cracked like a whip.

The brains of the two wolfish men worked with the speed of chain lightning. Neither obeyed the order to surrender. Mack cursed, dropped his wood, and whirled, his right hand streaking for his gun. The cunning Stinley held on to his armful of sticks. He jerked them vertically, ducked his head behind them and leaped for the dorway.

Two tongues of flame licked into the gloom, slanting out from the crouched figure of the Rambling Ranny. One bullet knocked the pudgy faced Mack backward. His own gun spoke belatedly, sending a streak of fire jabbing toward the

ceiling. There was a chugging sound as the slug went through the roof.

The bullet which Rambling had directed at Stinley slammed into the armful of wood which the man had used as a shield. Before the cowboy could fire at the bandit leader again, the tall form had leaped through the doorway and disappeared.

MACK had been hit in the left shoulder. He had tumbled back against an edge of the fireplace, and now the dull glow shed by the coals and the dying flames showed a red rimmed hole in his coat. Half lying, half sitting, with body propped on one elbow, he fired again.

But quick-thinking Tim Farrell had leaped to one side after his first blast. The hot slug streaked a course through his clothing and across his ribs without breaking the skin.

As he made his catlike move, he fired both guns again, aiming one bullet at the door—just in case Stinley might be about to stick his head past the frame. The other leaden pellet went ripping into the man who rested on the hearth.

This time it was the right shoulder which was hit. It was lucky for Mack that he had been turned sidewise to the fighting cowboy. He dropped his gun and swore luridly. He reached to retrieve his weapon.

"Don't touch it!' Rambling barked, but the outlaw paid no atention.

The cowboy did not know whether or not the killer would again be able to wield the six-gun, so he took no chances. He sprang across the room and dealt a cracking blow with a gun. Mack uttered a throaty: "Wumph!" and slumped back senseless.

Stinley had been gone from the room no longer than five seconds. Rambling, listened, but heard no retreating footsteps. Borrowing the bandit leader's own strategy, he wheeled to the pile of equipment, grabbed up one of the saddles by its fork, and went pounding to the door. Bunching himself so as to get as much as possible of his bulk behind the saddle, he sprang outside.

Just as he had expected!

Stinley was waiting for him, gun trained toward the door. As Rambling went flying out into the falling snow, he saw a head protruding past a corner of the house. Gun flame viciously bit the darkness. A shot rang loudly. A bullet whammed into the saddle so hard that he was staggered.

He fired in return. The bullet nicked the end of a log, right in front of the spot where Stinley's face had been an instant before.

The killer had ducked as Rambling's gun had swung to cover him. The long legged waddy went pounding on to the next corner. As he crouched and peeped around it, he again was using the saddle for a shield, but this time there was no shot, nor did he see Stinley.

A MUFFLED thudding of footsteps told that the man was in flight. "Aims to grab hisself a hoss and breeze, I reckon," the cowpoke reasoned. "Well, I don't intend to let him get away."

He flung aside the saddle and ran to the rear of the cabin. Through the falling snow and the darkness he could see a dim form, dodging among the scattered pines that stood to the north of the house. He fired one shot.

The flame of his gun blinded him for an instant. By the time that his eyes had become again accustomed to the darkness, the running, dodging form had vanished. Nor did he hear the rapid footsteps anymore.

"He wasn't runnin' towards their hosses," thought Rambling. "I reckon he just made for the nearest cover."

He went pounding along, his boots

tearing up the snow, his old bat-wings flapping, his broad brimmed Stetson pulled low. The tracks were easy to follow; so easy that he could see them while keeping a sharp look-out for Stinley.

THE stand of pines became somewhat thicker. There were scattered bushes, too. He sprinted on, regardless of the increased danger.

He paused. Faintly came a beating of footsteps from off to his left. He wheeled, deserted the trail he had been following, and ran straight toward the spot from which the sound of running feet was coming. He sprinted on his toes, so that his own footsteps would not be heard.

Stinley had circled back, and apparently was making for the cabin. As Rambling came again to the edge of the scattered stand of pines, he saw a dim form near the lonely little house. He leveled down with a six-gun; then changed his mind.

He reasoned swiftly that Stinley had decoyed him away from the cabin, so that the fellow could circle back, take the rest of the express loot from the two outlaws, whom he probably thought were dead; then run for his horse. Rambling knew where the mounts of the desperadoes were sheltered. "I'll find 'em, and wait for the coyote there," he decided.

Turning in the opposite direction from that taken by the killer, he circled toward a line of cliffs a hundred yards to the east of the cabin. Yes, there were the horses, standing in a little bottle necked cove formed by cliffs. Lariats stretched across the opening completed the corral. Rambling squatted behind a big chunk of rock and waited.

His reasoning proved correct. Soon he descried a vague, moving shadow, coming in his direction. He slipped into the cove and pressed himself into a crevice in a cliff wall.

Tense seconds, while the ghostly snow came down, and a dead silence lay over all. Then there were soft, swift footfalls! A human form came into Rambling's range of vison.

It was Stinley. He had entered the pocket and was carrying his riding equipment. He paused to look back in the direction from which he had come. At that moment his back was turned to Rambling.

Softly the cowboy stepped out of the cliff crevice, holding two leveled guns. "Freeze, *hombre!* Better not take a chance this time, or I'll kill you!"

He saw the tall form stiffen; then slowly the desperado turned his head and looked over one shoulder.

Rambling snapped: "Drop that equipment! Jab up yore hands! A move towards yore gun, and you'll get a snow shroud, like Garcias'!"

THE saddle, blanket and bridle clattered to the ground. The man's hands went up.

"Now keep 'em up, and turn, careful like!"

Stinley began turning, very slowly. "You win, cowboy. I know when I hold losing cards. I—"

Belying the hopeless talk, the man suddenly ducked low and sent a hand darting under his fleece lined coat. Rambling jerked the triggers of his guns, but the bandit had got under the two slugs. They burned eyes in the crown of his hat, and went whisking on into the night.

Bang! It seemed to Rambling that the gun exploded right in his face. He felt himself hurled back against the cliff. His left shoulder was numb and limp. The six-gun on that side dropped into the snow.

Acting by instinct, he fired again, even as his shoulders bumped against the wall of rock. He saw Stinley's head jerk forward; one hand go to his stomach. The man dropped to one knee; but the next instant his

chin came up and he fired again.

Rambling had shot, too—first by a thin fraction of a second. He heard an angry zip at his left ear; then the spat of a bullet against rock. As Rambling's last shot rocked back and forth there in the cliff-bound cove, Stinley flopped backward.

RAMBLING waited a few seconds, watchful, ready; but the other did not move. He advanced cautiously and stood over the man. Stinley lay with arms flung wide, left leg doubled back under the right one; cold drops of snow flecking his upturned face.

It took Rambling Ranny but a moment to ascertain that the man was dead. He turned to leave the cliff-bound cove. Then he froze, gun sweeping to cover a form that stood in the mouth of the pocket.

"Wup! Just a minute!" the newcomer called hurriedly, and he put up his hands in evidence of his friendly intent. "This is the sheriff!"

Rambling recognized the small, bowlegged figure with the broad shoulders; the black Stetson cocked to one side of the head; the leather coat. A grin spread over the waddy's long, bony face.

"Advance, friend," he invited.

The sheriff explained. The situation was just about as Rambling had guessed it to be. The little officer had suspected Stinley and the man's two cronies, and had kept a close eye on them. Foxy, they had been aware of his suspicion. He had searched each of them before they had left town, one at a time, by different routes.

Feeling that something was up, he had tried to shadow Stinley, but the cunning fellow had discovered that he was being trailed and had eluded the sheriff. The officer had heard the shot which had dropped Rambling from his horse when the three men had held him up.

"I took up the trail from that point, and followed it into the mountains. I was plumb bewildered and goin' around in circles, when I heard gunfire down this way, so I come a runnin'.

"Looks like you done a right clean job, cowboy. Garcias and Stinley are dead. Gap is tied up neat and purty.

"I found Mack unconscious from two shoulder wounds.

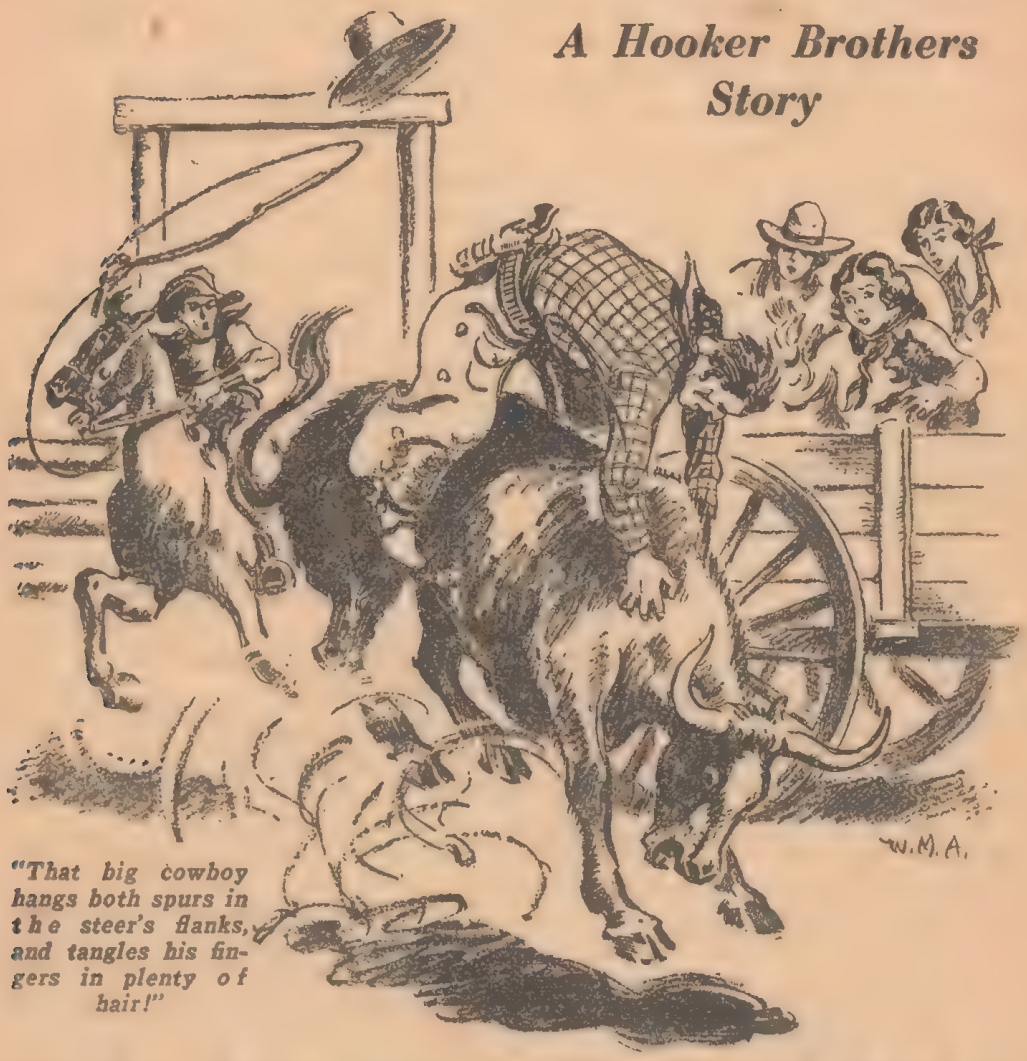
"Wells Fargo has a standing reward for bandits who rob the company, so you've got a right nice wad of money comin', cowboy."

Again Rambling grinned. "Thanks, Sheriff, I kin use it. And now if you don't mind, I'll let you fix up this yere shoulder. I guess you ain't noticed, but it's shot, and hurts like everything."

In the September THRILLING WESTERN, a Gala Roundup of Swift-Moving, Rip-Roaring Western Yarns by Such Top Hand Writers as Clee Woods, Johnston McCulley, Jackson Cole, F. H. Litten, Francis W. Hilton and Others

One Man *Roadeyo*

A Hooker Brothers Story



"That big cowboy hangs both spurs in the steer's flanks, and tangles his fingers in plenty of hair!"

One-Ton Benson Plans to Do Himself Proud by Showing Off His Skill as a Cowpoke—But the Rest of the Outfit Don't Exactly Approve!

By RAY NAFZIGER

Author of "When Polo Came to Canyon Lobo," etc.

WHATEVER they can say against me—Johnny Hooker—and my li'l brother Stevie what's my pardner on a cow ranch here in Canyon Lobo, they can't say we don't stand by our pals all same as a hungry bull standin' by a fenced-in hay stack.

Take our cowboys—"One-Ton" Benson and old George and Pablo—

why, me and Stevie is fathers to them three simple-minded cowhands. We look after their healths and their morals and money and even their romances. Specially their romances.

Me and Stevie always figgered that our hippo of a cowhand of a One-Ton Benson was sorta safe from wimmen on account of his face. His map simply ain't the kind wimmen go crazy about; in fact we always thought you couldn't even git a bulldog in the same room with him.

One-Ton, besides bein' homely, is also serious and sorta gloomy, but it seems they's all kinds of wimmen, and one fin'ly falls for him. An' One-Ton, not bein' wise to wimmen, falls for her, too.

WHICH shore makes it lucky Hooker Bros. is lookin' after him. Me and Stevie, we're a pair that whatever else they can say against us, they can't say we don't savvy wimmen from A to Z.

We suspect a woman soon's One-Ton tooken to shaven' his moon face twicet a week, while blossomin' out in a grass-green silk shirt and a big rainbow hankie tied loose around his neck, so when he lopes out after a calf said hankie flops in the breeze like a buck Injun makin' blanket signals.

The signs is easy for me and Stevie to read: some damsel is ridin' herd on One-Ton.

On the mornin' when he lopes out his horse while decked in duds like a Mexican goin' to a three-day fiesta, it ain't hard to figger he ain't jist ridin' off only to grease a flock of windmills. That's where I decides to think it over and then act.

I can't figger out who's responsible until I happen to think that One-Ton's been ridin' regular over to a small pasture we rent over next to the Spider Ranch, which was sold to some Eastern folks last spring.

That must be what's causin' all this heartstorm — some tenderfoot dood of a feemale Easterner, which is the most dangerous kind of feemale they is. It's turrible to think how many fine young cowboys has been run into a trap and branded by these rich Eastern dood feemales.

This is really serious. Our good old pal is in deadly danger. These Eastern ladies is a plumb loss as a cowboy's wife. Turn 'em loose in a ranch shack and they can't even open a can of beans. Yessir, a cowboy that runs a strange herd by takin' up with these Eastern ladies is makin' a big mistake. They're too fancy a breed for a cowboy that's been weaned on sourdough biskits.

What a cowboy wants is the pioneer type of gal that ain't skeered to start clubbin' a mountain lion what's makin passes at a colt, or above doctorin' a few screw worms in a pinch.

No sooner has I decided my old pal One-Ton's in this deadly danger then I climb on my horse and I points my saddle horn straight ahead until I'm lookin' down on this Spider outfit from the canyon rim.

Gran Quivera, them tenderfoots certainly has changed around the scenery on that old Spider Ranch, movin' a hill here an' fillin' a side canyon here, to git room to put up a big hotel with a green tile roof and pink walls, which is prob'ly them Eastern owners' idee of a ranch house.

ON my way down the slope, who does I run into but my li'l loafer of a brother Stevie.

"So you had the same idee I had?" he asks.

"Shore," I tells him. "What's gatherin' a few cows compared to savin' a pal from a Fate Worse Than Death —marryin' a Eastern dood?"

Stevie's got a bottle, and we has a drink and shakes hands on the prop-

osition of savin' our old pal. Nobody's around the corrals, not even a cow, so we ride up to the front door and knocks.

It opens and the biggest woman I ever seen stands there lookin' at us, a blond lady that weighs at least 250 on the hoof, if I'm any good at guessin' a critter's weight, which I am. She's got on English ridin' boots and them kind of ridin' pants that flares up at the top, and in her case they flares out like a coupla balloons.

SHE'S carryin' somethin' under one arm that looks like a piece somebody bit out of a pair of Angory chaps, but lookin' closer I see a coupla shoebutton eyes, and I know it's some kind of a dang poodle. This poodle seein' me and Stevie lets out a chirp a li'l louder than a cricket, and then he has a whole spasm of yips.

"Now, now, Frizzie," this lady tells the insect. "Naughty mens won't hurt you."

That city-reared hothouse pooch refuses to take her word for that; he wiggles loose and gallops back down the hall a-yelpin' for the cops.

"Excuse us, ma'am," I says as we takes off our hats, "we jist dropped by to have a li'l friendly talk with the boss."

"I'm the boss around here," she says. "Miz. Forsythe-Smith, owner of the Spider, which I intends to stock with cattle soon and run as a cow ranch. What can I do for you?"

"Well, you see how it is, ma'am," I begins. "We're Johnny and Stevie Hooker, Stevie bein' this li'l coot here. We run cows over in Canyon Lobo and we—"

Here she busts in on us with a pleased yelp. "So you are the Hookers that employ Mr. Benson! I am so fond of him. He is such a nice fellow. Such a dear boy."

Me and Stevie look at each other kinda horrorfied. So this is the feemale that fell for One-Ton. A Mrs. and a widder on top. I guess them two bein' about the same size has roused their interest.

"Mr. Benson has mentioned you a hundred times," she gushes on. "He has told us dozens of funny stories about you. Simply side-splittin' stories."

"Well, ain't that like a real pal?" Stevie remarks, sour. "Makin' fun of us, hey?" You ought to hear the funny stories we could tell about that fat elephant."

She urges us to come in the house, and before we can dodge away from her loop, she's hazin' us on down the hall and into a big livin' room.

"Oh, girls," she calls, "you must meet two of my neighbors, the Hooker brothers of whom Mr. Benson has told me so much. These are two of my nieces and their friends. They've arrived to visit with me."

She starts reelin' off names, but I'm too stunned to ketch any of 'em. It looks to me like a whole girls' school has come to visit that ranch, and peaches, all of 'em. A red-head, two of these here platinum blondes and two jist ordinary blondes. It's enough to stampede a cowboy, runnin' unexpected on a heifer herd like that, but there ain't no chance of stampedin' with the Mrs. blockin' the door.

THAT sheek Stevie makes hisself right at home, but me, I stand there foolish, plumb bogged down in a carpet so thick it pushes my spurs up my boot leg. An' when I sets down in a big, soft chair, I sink so far down nothin' is showin' but my ears.

"You're jist over here in time for tea," she says.

"Don't bother about tea, ma'am," I says hasty. "We got to be goin' and we hardly ever drink tea, anyway."

I know about these lady tea drinkin's where they serve you a napkin like a postage stamp, a cup an' saucer and spoon and a chunka cake, and

you play a game of seein' which you'll drop first.

She don't pay no attention, jist jingles a bell, and after a bit a Chink cook comes into that room pushin' a cart loaded down with a big silver jug and some tall glasses, and I see this is a cold tea party.

This here Miz. Forsythe-Smith she walks over and clinks her filled glass ag'in mine and says real kitenish:

"Here's to the wild cowboys
That roam the Wild West;
Wear hair on their chaps,
And the same on their chest."

So I answers the old girl back with a verse I makes up in the spur of the moment, runnin':

"Here's to tenderfeet damsels,
They're plumb *muy bonita;*
For us lonesome cowboys,
They shore is a treata."

I'm kinda thirsty, and them there iced drinks sorta hits the spot, so the Mrs. and the li'l damsels and me and Stevie h'ists our drinks, friendly as a bunch of cowpunchers at the old Longhorn Bar.

"There's no kick to that fruit juice, which of course there wouldn't be, this crowd bein' all ladies what wouldn't be drinkin' this time of day, or no other time either. While I ain't lookin' the Chink slips over and tips that big silver jug down over my glass, and I empties it jist to be perlite.

THEY'S also some refreshments which calls for another drink to wash 'em down, and about then I begins to wonder if I ain't got a forked stomach, as that iced fruit juice keeps goin' on down both my legs and sets my spur rowels to jinglin', whilst this Miz. Forsythe-Smith and the damsels gits sorta hazy to me and seems to be swimmin' around in the air.

They're a friendly lot, them li'l gals is, gatherin' close around me and Stevie. They act sorta starved for a look at a cowboy, although at first they don't believe we're real ones, claimin' there must be some Hollywood outfit takin' pictures in the neighborhood. I can't see how come One-Ton could fall for that old warhorse of a widder aunt, with that red-head and all them assorted blondes around.

WELL, there ain't no fruit juice mixture can make Johnny Hooker wobble or forgit what he came after, so I clear my throat.

"Well, this shore has all been enjoyable," I says. "We jist dropped over here to talk to you about this rider we call One-Ton Benson account his size. He's jist a roughneck cowboy, Miz. Forsythe-Smith, with hardly enough manners to behave hisself in a brandin' corral, let alone in a parlor. Unsaddle him in a fancy stable like this and he'd— Hold on there!" I suddenly bellers.

When I first come in, I tried to hide the gun I happened to be wearin', fin'ly pushin it down behind the cushion of my chair. I forgot about it until that li'l redhead reaches in now and picks it up.

"Oh, look at this!" she says. "A real gun."

"Hey, look out!" I says, makin' a grab for it. "That'll go off and hurt somebody. Gimme that gun back."

"Isn't it cute?' she says, laughin', while she dodges away from me. "I s'pose this is what they call the hammer and you pull it back like this—"

"For gosh sake!" I bawls, makin' another wild grab. "Gimme—"

"Yeh!" yelps Stevie. "Let us have that—"

"WHAM!"

"Ooo-eee!" screeches Miz. Forsythe-Smith and the gals as some china in a closet crashes. That gun I'm carryin' is a double-action, and that fool red-head bein' nervous, she squeezes the trigger ag'in, and the

hammer comes back and *"WHAM!"* Some more china crashes on the other side of the room.

"OOO-EEEE!" screeches all them wimmen, and I feels like doin' it myself.

"For gosh sake!" bellers Stevie. "Let us have that gun before—"

"Ooo-eee!" yells that red-head and *"WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!"* that old double-action goes off ag'in. It seems that girl's so nervous all she thinks to do is keep pullin' the trigger.

THAT Chink gives one yowl and he goes through the glass doors into the court, leavin' most of his white coat hangin' to glass splinters.

"What's happenin'?" bawls somebody from the doorway jist as I git back my gun. "What's the idee, Johnny Hooker," asks One-Ton, "firin' off a gun in a lady's house? Take this, you roughneck!"

"WHAP!" He leans a fist ag'in my jaw and I staggers back and takes out what glass that Chink left in the doors.

Stevie steps in and explains how it happened, but One-Ton's still sore when we fin'ly git started for home. But before we start, Miz. Forsythe-Smith has invited me and Stevie over for a one-man roadeyo which One-Ton is to put on for 'em a few days later.

It seems she ain't got no cattle or cowboys on her ranch yet, and One-Ton has volunteered to put on a one-man roadeyo—bronc ridin', ropin' and bulldoggin'—for the entertainment of the guests of the Mrs.

"Why, shore, we'd be glad to come," I tells her.

"That gun jist goes to show," I lectures One-Ton on the way home, "what happens when you git to foolin' around these Eastern wimmen. They don't savvy any of the things in the West, and you better lay off 'em before you git wrecked."

"There ain't no use talkin' to me," says One-Ton. "I know a real woman when I see her. West or East, and Miz. Forsythe-Smith is that. She's got a heart as big as all outdoors."

"Haw! Haw!" snickers Stevie. He don't say nothin' more, jest laughs, and I got to talk fast to keep One-Ton from pullin' us offa our horses and haulin' off.

"What kind of a stew party you boys been on?" asks old George when we git back. "An' why ain't you been helpin' round up those cattle down that canyon?"

"We been callin' on some neighbors," I says. "An' met up with the old dood gal that's bought the old Spider outfit."

"Miz. Forsythe-Smith to y o u!" bellers One-Ton, swellin' up like a turkey gobbler. "I'm on a—uh—business deal with her, and I'll thank you to use more respectful langwidge.

"And as for that one-man roadeyo where I'm to do bronc ridin', ropin' and bulldoggin', while you was invited to come, I want you to forgit it. I'll thank you fellers to stay away from it, as I don't want you drunk bums queerin' this—uh—business deal I got on with Miz. Forsythe-Smith.

"An' this roadeyo is important to me. I want to show her I'm a real cowboy. You see—"

"That's all right, One-Ton," busts in Stevie, winkin' at me. "We simply ain't the ones what would leave a old pal like you in the lurch. You can depend on the Hooker brothers to cooperate in this here crisis and—uh—business deal."

"SO that One-Ton aimed to put on a one-man roadeyo over there," I says after he's clumped mutterin' away. "He's been tellin' that female whale in balloon pants what a great cowboy he is, has he? And he's goin' to show her he can bulldog and rope and ride some bad broncs.

"We got to throw a monkey wrench

into that to save One-Ton from that woman.

"We got to go over and give him some competition."

"It ain't never goin' to be said," says Stevie, "that Hooker Brothers ever went back on a old pal."

"Yeah?" says old George. "Did you say there was a blonde over there?"

"Four of 'em," I says. "An' prettier'n a double order o' fried eggs on a big brown T-bone steak looks to a hungry puncher."

"ALL for one and one for all—that's Hooker Bros!" says Stevie. "About this one-man roadeyo, we'll all take part in it. Me and Pablo will show them damsels and o' course Miz. Forsythe-Smith how ropin' should be done, both of us bein' able to rope all around One-Ton. An' you, Johnny, you'll do the bronc ridin' and show up One-Ton in that.

"But how about the bulldoggin'? That's One-Ton's specialty; he'll show up as a hero shore in that. There ain't nothin' so specktackular as bulldoggin' and once the old gal sees One-Ton wrastlin' down a steer, dynamite and high water won't stop her from marryin' him."

"I'll think that over," I promises. "Leave it to me." And the next day, havin' found out I can think better when I'm in the shade outa the hot sun, I leaves the hot flats where we're roundin' up and heads for the only shade in ten miles—"Pap" Osborne's store at the McCarty whistlin' post.

Pap is settin' out on a li'l platform in front of his store. He cuts hisself a fresh cud from his plug of Brown's Mule.

I asks him, "How's business?"

"Good," says Pap, "since those doods moved on the Spider. They eat groceries from stores 'stead of their neighbor's beef."

"Ain't they a disgrace to the country?" I says.

"Yeah," he agrees. "They shore are —payin' cash for supplies like they do. I wisht the Hooker boys would start disgracin' theirselfs likewise."

I don't pay no attention to such remarks. A man in the cattle business soon gits his hide toughened to hearin' creditors yellin' about not gittin' their bills paid. But lookin' for some way to change the subjeck, which seems sorta painful to Pap, I happens to look at his li'l round corral where there's a li'l brown critter pacin' around restless.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Roadeyo stock," he says. "It's left over from a Wild West show that fed here a few days ago and couldn't pay a bill, so they give me a steer. It's one of these here Brayma critters they use for steer ridin' and bulldoggin' and such."

"Bulldoggin' steer, is he, hey?" I says.

Pap and me walk over to look at this critter. As that steer sees us movin' toward him, he lets out a "Ba-a-aaw! Woof!" and heads straight for us, climbin right up ag'in the corral.

HE'S got li'l black eyes and short, sharp horns. He ain't very big, but what he ain't got in size he makes up for in action. Wow! He's shore been born with a permanent hard twist in his tail.

"So they actually use that maneater for bulldoggin'?" I says while he makes the dirt fly with his front hoofs. "I'd ruther drop down on a grizzly bear. How much you got ag'in him?"

"Twenty dollars, cash on the counter," Pap says. "Or twenty-five on the books."

I studies it over. I don't want to git my old pal, One-Ton, hurt, and yet if he shows up poor in the bulldoggin', he'll be saved from the fate of bein' a pet poodle dog like her Frizzie pooch for that heavyweight dame.

I decides to risk gittin' him hurt, and anyway, when he sees that savage

brute he'll likely back down from tryin' to bulldog him a-tall.

"Put him on the books," I says, backin' away from there as that steer goes "Baw!" and tries to bust down the corral to git at me.

"Come and git him quick then," says Pap. "I 'low he's kind o' dry. I tried to water him twice by lettin' a bucket down over the corral fence, but each time he runs a horn through it afore it gits to the ground. You better be careful how you handle the vicious li'l devil."

"That's all right," I says. "Johnny Hooker don't worry about handlin' no salty li'l steer."

SO I ride back to the ranch and tells Pablo and old George I aims to make Miz. Forsythe-Smith a present of a steer for bulldoggin' and for them to git him at Pap's and deliver him at the Spider Ranch and put him in a good strong corral.

"An' you better take two good ropes," I tells 'em, "and tie 'em on to this critter afore you let him outa the corral, 'cause he's kinda snaky."

"Don't worry; we breeng heem," says Pablo, grinnin' and reachin' for his stirrup.

"And don't forgit to tell Miz. Forsythe-Smith it's with my compliments," I orders them boys.

Pablo ain't grinnin' when him and old George comes in late that night. Both Pablo's overall legs is ripped up the sides and he's got half the side o' his face peeled, while old George is sorta squashed over his horn like he's put in a hard day's work.

They say they delivered the steer to Miz. Forsythe-Smith with my compliments, but if I ever asks 'em to deliver another ornery snake-blood like that, I can have their jobs with their compliments.

The day for the roadeyo lopes up, and me and Stevie and One-Ton and Pablo and Old George rides over together. One-Ton's kinda resigned hisself to the sackerfice we're makin' in comin' over to help him put on the one-man roadeyo, although at first he bellered and snorted like that Brayma steer.

He's all slicked up in his silk shirt and fancy outfit, along with a brand-new ten-gallon hat. All of us is outfitted sorta gaudy, rememberin' them blondes and the redhead and decidin' we might as well give'em a eyeful.

"A fine pair o' pals you are!" One-Ton grouches on the way over. "But I'll put it across, anyway. I'll show Miz. Forsythe-Smith how a real hand does bulldoggin'. You boys can take the honors in the ridin' and ropin', but she'll see it takes a real man to do bulldoggin', and she'll see one when I perform."

We don't say nothin' 'cause it won't do no good. That fat cowhand has gone goofy, but I got lots o' faith in that li'l Brayma steer. No man in his right senses is goin' to tackle that feerocious animil. One-Ton, he'll simply back down, and this here he-man-worshippin' feemale will lose interest in him.

AT the ranch that there Miz. Forsythe-Smith, with that poodle pooch of a Frizzie under her arm, greets us real friendly, specially One-Ton. Them li'l damsels visitin' her, they is dressed in new cowgirl outfits, and they sure take my eye.

Now, if One-Ton had only fell for one of 'em I'd say let him go to it, but if he ain't got sense enough to fall for 'em, me and Stevie has. Stevie in fact falls for three of 'em and I fall for the other two.

"I'm so anxious to see you bulldog," that old girl gushes at One-Ton. "I have the cutest li'l animal for that event, the one Mr. Hooker was kind enough to send over." An' she sorta makes goo-goo eyes at One-Ton, while she cuddles that hairy insect of a pooch against her chin.

It's a real swell show our ranch puts

on for them dood girls, altho it ain't exactly a one-man roadeyo no more. The audience, consistin' of the Mrs. and them five pretty damsels, is perched on a wagon for a grand stand.

Stevie and Pablo does some pretty good calf ropin', and the broncs I and Stevie ride is showy buckers. But we knows what they're goin' to do next better than the broncs do.

We makes it all look turrible rough for them doods, and they whoops and cheers, while the Chink keeps busy comin' outa the house carryin' drinks.

DUE to them drinks, the roadeyo is kinda hazy by the time we shoves the Brayma devil into the chute for the 'doggin'. He ain't tamed down none since I seen him last. Fact is he seems madder, and kicks up such a racket One-Ton rides over for a look.

"M' Gosh, where'd that man-eatin' tiger come from?" he asks, considerable supprised, and forgittin' Miz. Forsythe-Smith told him I furnished it.

"That," says I, "is what is a perfessional bulldoggin' steer. Jist what you want to show off for your li'l old gal."

"Miz. Forsythe-Smith to you!" he growls. "An' when I git this—uh—business deal fixed up with her, I'll tell you nosey Hookers where t' git off at."

"Ba-ah-ah! Oof!" remarks Mr. Brayma, an' he perceeds to rip 'bout a foot o' board off the side of the chute with his horns. One-Ton looks down at him sorta doubtful.

"Ain't gittin scairt, are yuh?" I says. "If you are, I'll call for volunteers to do this bulldoggin'." But One-Ton throws off his hat and raises his hand. He's ready. "La-d-e-e-s an' gen-t-le-men!" old George who's announcer bellers through his cupped hands. "The next e-v-e-n-t will be One-Ton Benson bulldoggin' a gen-uwine, wild, fee-rocious Brayma steer."

"Turn him out!" bawls One-Ton. "Afore I wraps this hardtwist 'round some of your necks."

I gits over on the other side o' the chute, since I'm gonna haze for him, and I aim to give him a square deal. We're both ridin' our top horses, an' I figger we're goin' to need 'em. I waits till I see One-Ton is all set, then I hollers to Pablo what's handlin' the gate.

"Turn 'im loose!"

Mister Brayma gives a loud "Baw-w-w!" and whizzes outa there like a streak o' greased lightnin', an' me and One-Ton lays right alongside him.

I'm crowdin him over ag'in One-Ton and One-Ton is layin' his horse right up close. I don't know if the steer is really scairt or he's jist seen something up ahead he wants to stick his horns into.

We're not far from the wagon where sets Miz. Forsythe-Smith and the damsels, when I see One-Ton start to make a dive for the critter's horns.

Throwin' his weight on it that-away is moren' the worn stirrup leather can stand, and she busts right now. One-Ton lands on the steer crossways of the critter's back, and then things begin to pop.

ONE-TON ain't too drunk to realize the only chance he's got is to ride the steer down and then slide over his neck and bulldog him. That big cowboy straightens up and hangs both spurs in the steer's flanks and tangles his fingers in plenty o' hair.

By this time the specktaters in the wagon are all standin' up an' cheerin' their heads off. That goes except for Miz. Forsythe-Smith's poodle dog, Frizzie, what has hopped outa the wagon and is comin' yip-yippin' 'cross the field right in the middle o' the excitement.

When I say that Brayma steer can buck, I mean jist what I say. I guess mebbe he was one of these steers they

used for steer ridin' 'stead of bulldoggin'. He seems to quit livin' down on the ground. He sails up, shakes hisself twice in midair, kicks clear past both o' One-Ton's ears and lights 'goin back the other way. An' all the time he's "Baaw-w-win'" like a locoed bronc.

I'm kinda hopin' One-Ton will ride him to a finish—and he did—One-Ton's finish. When the steer sees he ain't goin' to git rid of One-Ton by reg'lar buckin', he takes a quick run and goes sailin' off up in the air sideways, twists hisself around like a corkscrew, and comes down headed the other way with the throttle wide open. Only, when he lights he's all alone.

One-Ton turns over twice in the air, but he don't come down straight. He was headed the way that steer was goin' when the critter turned 'round while up in the air. When the steer quit him, One-Ton was left sorta twisted up, and he lights on one hand and one foot and turns three cartwheels afore he comes to a stop.

From the wagon comes yelps. This is the first accident we've had and them ladies is all stirred up over it. They piles outa that wagon intendin' to run across to help One-Ton. All of us yells wild at them to stay back, as that vicious Brayma steer is loose.

WHEN One-Ton stands up, I see he's got a handful o' Brayma steer hair in each paw, and plenty more is trailin' from his spurs. He ain't hurt none, and quick runs over to git between the wimmen and that steer who, bein' sore at havin' all that hair pulled outa him by the roots, is headin' toward the wagon, head down and snortin' ev'ry jump.

That steer's plain declared war on ev'rything in sight, and the gaudy clothes of them doods in front of the wagon has took his eye.

I'm shakin' down a loop and diggin' my horse with the spurs while Pablo and Stevie is also chargin' in. But One-Ton, he sees we may be too late to git that steer afore the critter reaches them wimmen. He heads in afoot.

Bulldoggin' a chargin' steer from the ground simply ain't bein done this season. One-Ton's only chance is t' sidestep the Brayma when he gits up close, and then ketch his horns as he goes by, and he squats to do it all same as a Castilian bull-fighter. Brave! That big cowboy is so brave I could sock him in the jaw.

ONLY, while he's waitin', that danged poodle dog Frizzie, what's run out to mix in on this, comes yappin' up t' One-Ton and grabs him by a leg. I can hear Miz. Forsythe-Smith over in front of the wagon hollerin'.

"Oh, Mr. Benson, Mr. Benson!" she calls. "Save my Frizzie! Save my Frizzie!"

One-Ton I guess don't hear it, or he's too busy thinkin' of that steer comin' his way. He hauls off and plants a boot in Frizzie's ribs, landin' him 'bout twenty feet away.

This kinda throws One-Ton off his balance, an' he ain't got no time to sidestep that steer. So as this Brayma critter comes on head down, One-Ton does the quickest bit of quick thinkin' I ever saw and jumps straight up and comes down 'straddlin' o' the steer's neck, legs clampin' tight.

His weight jams that steer's head down on the ground and over the animile goes, tail in the air, jist as neat as if he'd been bulldogged. When he hits the ground that Brayma bawls something savage and goes wild tryin' t' git up, but One-Ton's got a scissor hold on his neck.

You never saw nothin' prettier or slicker than that stunt of savin' a bunch of helpless wimmen from a locoed steer. I'm sure proud of my old pal, One-Ton.

I ride over and drops my loop on the critter's hind legs and we soon

got him stretched out. One-Ton lets go and stands up. He ain't got much clothes on from his waist up, and one ear acts kinda floppy.

Them feemales all come rushin' over, Miz. Forsythe-Smith in the lead. I reckon she's goin' to fling her arms around One-Ton and claim that hero for her own on the spot, and I don't blame her.

INSTEAD she stops and picks up her poodle, which is yelpin' indignant from that kick One-Ton give him, and then she prances right up t' that big elephant of a cowboy.

"You big brute!" she hollers. "To think you would mistreat my poor li'l Frizzie instead of savin' him as I asked you. Takin' advantage of my poor 'ittle Ootzie-ootzums by kickin' him. Actually kickin' him! I'll teach you!"

Smack!

She hauls off and lands a open-handed hay-maker right on poor One-Ton's sore ear. Then she reaches up with both hands and starts clawin' at his face, tryin' real earnest to take out a few samples o' his hair at the same time.

"And you'd like a job bein' foreman on my place, would you?" she screeches. "You think you could work for me and run my ranch, do you?"

Well, that's a shock, and what we learns later is still more of a shock. She has a husband out East who's been closin' up his business to come join her on the ranch. And One-Ton was only wantin' a job as foreman when she started stockin' it with cattle. That was the business deal he was hintin' at. And here the goof has put me and Stevie to all this trouble by not explainin'.

One-Ton start t' say something to her, but he don't git no chance to horn in on that jawin'. Fin'ly he makes a bee-line for his horse, while she keeps addressin' hot remarks to his back.

"An' the same goes for the rest of you," she says to me and Stevie and Pablo and old George. "A bunch of roughneck cowboys! Brutes, that's what all of you are. No feelin's. You'd all stand still and see my li'l Frizzie kicked and not say a word.

"I forbid you to come on this ranch any more. Bad mens, ain't they, Frizzie?" she says, buryin' her face in that piece of a tore-off Angory chaps.

Well, it looks like there wasn't much reason stayin' 'round there no more, so we all starts for home. After all, it's a lucky thing One-Ton never got a job workin' for a onreasonable woman like that.

But with the present temper One-Ton's in, it'll take some time for him to realize that, of course. As it is now, he'll prob'ly blame me and Stevie for causin' all this.

WE ain't wrong about One-Ton bein' on the prod against us. He's so mad he don't say a word to us on the road home. It would of been hard for him to talk to us, anyway, without hollerin' pretty loud, bein' me and Stevie kept a half-mile away from him — ahead.

At times it sorta pushed his loyal pals pretty hard to keep that far ahead, but Hooker Bros. always makes it a point to ride sorta fast horses so's we can handle jist such emergencies.

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HORSE-BACK RIDING MADE EASY

By
Colonel Jno. J. Bonifacc
United States Cavalry

IN THE first three preceding articles in this series, we have taken up the initial training of horse and rider, riding at the walk and trot, and riding at the faster gaits—the lope, canter, gallop and run. Of course it must be assumed that the new rider has now passed through these steps and has acquired a fairly firm seat and knowledge of how to handle his horse. This being so, we come in this article, to that most fascinating form of horse-back riding

4. Riding on the Open Range

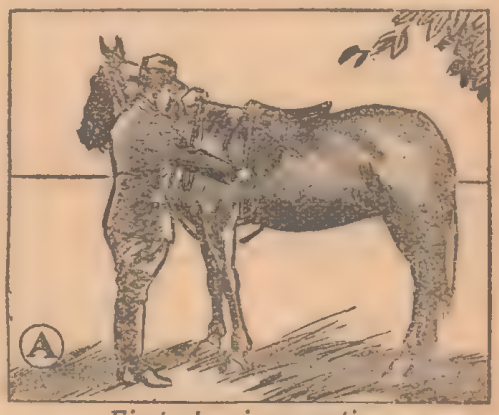
WHILE the term, "The open range," has, usually, application to the Western cow country, it also applies to *any* riding in open country. A diversified terrain is desirable, so that the rider has to go up hill and down dale, across gullies, hills, arroyos, dry washes, as well as across flat country at full speed. And in our Western country we frequently must follow narrow trails which wind along the sides of mountains and through mesquite and other brush.

A trained, sure-footed horse is most desirable and we assume that the new rider has such an animal. Horses which easily frighten and shy nervously, which are "pullers," "star gazers" and "jibbers" (wanting to go some other way than that desired by the rider) are not suitable for open country riding and are dangerous. The new rider should be sure that his horse is suitable and one accustomed to such country. A very large horse (16 hands or so) is rarely the sort for this open-country riding.

Again we say, select a quiet, steady animal of about 15 hands and of about a thousand pounds in weight. The western cow-horse is often smaller, and extremely quick and sure-footed. And the horse should be trained to "ground hitching" (staying in one spot, with dragging reins, whenever the rider gets off to do something—fence fixing, hunting, fishing, camping, etc.).

Training of Horses

Ranches have various methods for training horses in this most desirable way. A horse that will run off as soon as the reins are dropped, or one which shies away from a dismounted person approaching it, will leave the rider afoot, and often with a long, weary, possibly even dangerous walk ahead to get home. Most horses, minus saddle and bridle, will walk away from a man and often break into a run.



First step in mounting

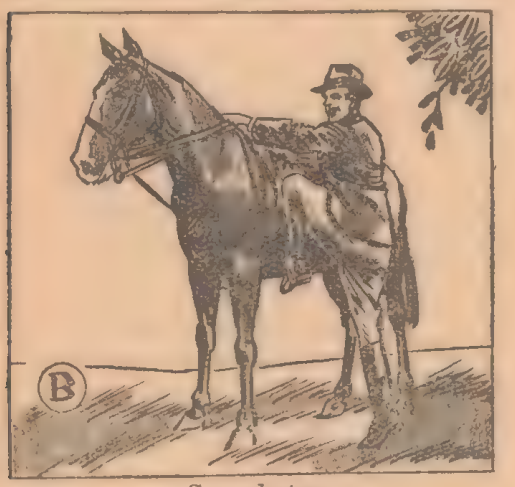
But once the saddle and bridle are put on and the reins allowed to drag in the dust, the trained horse will stand there for hours, possibly wandering just a little to graze. But a person can always walk right up to the animal, at any time, and mount again without having to chase the

horse all over the country—and then not catch him.

Hitching Methods

Cavalry horses, civilian park horses and such are very rarely trained to "ground hitching." After dismounting, one must always hold the reins to be sure his horse will remain with him, or must tie him up to something. And, right here, let us know that we should *never* tie a horse by the reins to a hitch-rack or other firm object, for the horse may shy from something, or be one that jerks back, breaking the bridle and, probably, running away.

We carry a rope or a "tie strap," which can be used to tie the horse when necessary. This tie strap is about six feet long, pliable, of rope or leather, and can easily be carried on the pommel of a saddle. The end which is to be fastened to the horse should *never* be snapped into the bit rings when the horse is tied, for this, also, allows the horse to jerk back and break the bridle. The



Second step

tie rope should be placed around the horse's neck (not with a slip-knot, be it said, which would choke the horse) and the other end fastened to the rack. Cowboys generally use their lariats.

But the cowboy, riding the range, must frequently dismount when working on roundup, or fence fixing, or hunting, or handling other horses, roping, etc. Therefore, his horse *must* be trained to ground hitching; and, we may add, *every* horse is better if taught this. There are many methods. One is to saddle and bridle the horse and then tie one rein (both loose and dragging) to a log.

Leave the horse there for hours, feeding him, mounting him, getting off, slapping him with the hands and hat, walking and running up to him frequently. When the horse has become gentle through all of this and gets over his fear, then tie the animal to other logs out in the open, every time you get off. Soon the horse learns that dragging reins mean that they are fastened to some heavy weight and will not budge.

Later, allow the reins to drag without being fastened to anything. The horse believes he is tied and will stand there indefinitely. There are many methods, but the one given has been seen to work excellently well, and never a horse injured in any way.

How Cowboy Mounts

At the ranch or stable, after saddling and bridling, the rider (if a cowboy) mounts by standing beside the horse's *left* front leg, grasping reins and a lock of the mane in his left hand, uses his right hand to hold his stirrup while he places his *left* foot in the stirrup.

The rider's back is turned toward the horse's head, so that, if the horse starts, the rider can swing up quickly and not be left behind. After the foot (left) is in the stirrup, the right hand grasps the horn of the saddle (or pommel, if the saddle has no horn) and, springing from his *right* foot, goes up straight and quickly until his *left* leg is straight.

He is standing in that stirrup. Instantly but quietly he carries his

right leg over the cantle of the saddle, sits down in the saddle and puts his right foot into his right stirrup; and, as soon as seated, adjusts his reins as given in our first article. Usually these are held in the *left* hand, leaving the right hand free for whatever use may be called for.

Range Riding

For range riding (not when jumping fences, etc.), the range rider generally uses a stirrup-length somewhat longer than for ordinary, flat-saddle riding, but still short enough so that the heel of the rider is slightly lower than the toe. He sits in what is called the "fork" seat.

That is, his legs hang down more vertically than in the ordinary cavalry or civilian seat.

Now he starts away on his day's work. He sits easily, almost never posting.

Very often, he starts at a lope and maintains that gait a great deal during his day's work. On cold mornings it is well to go the first few hundred yards at a walk, to allow the blood to get circulating in the horse's feet.

When going up or down steep places, he brings his horse down to a walk or very slow trot, unless necessity demands a faster gait.

It is harmful to a horse's front legs to rush him up and down hills and, finally, such riding will make the horse what we term "stove up in front"—stiff in his front leg action. The rider never waters his horse while the animal is sweating, but allows him to cool off first. To allow a heated horse to sip a few mouthfuls is not harmful, but to permit the animal, while hot, to drink copiously, is very apt to "founder" the animal permanently.

In "founder" (laminitis) the nerves of the front feet are affected injuriously and the horse grows stiff in front, can hardly walk, and becomes unsafe. And the experienced rider never feeds grain to a heated horse—not until the animal has cooled off for about an hour or so; but he can feed hay to a heated horse at any

Third step

time and plentifully, without injuring the horse at all.

And, after the day's riding is over, the heated horse should not be tied up in a chilly stable, but should be turned loose in a corral, or, if he *must* be put in a stable, then blanketted until cool. And every horse is kept in much better condition by daily grooming. Good grooming takes about twenty minutes.

Have Help at Hand

The new rider, when starting range riding, should always go in company with others, so that there is help at hand in case of accident or losing of one's way—a very easy thing to have happen. And the new range rider should not keep going at furious gaits all day long. Consider your horse.

In our next article we shall take up riding at what we call the "artificial" gaits,—the fox-trot, running walk, single-foot, pace, etc. The new rider should practice frequently, and every day, if possible, for fully two hours a day, if he can.

Fingers of Doom

A Stranger Rides into Sundog—and Hell Starts Popping When He Smacks Up Against Stud Leeds, the Town's Toughest Gambler

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Two Way Trails," "Gun Justice," etc.

FARADAY rode into Sundog late in the afternoon. Lengthening shadows were weaving a fantastic pattern over the dusty main street. The lurid glare of the great red ball of the lowering sun lighted up his features for the scrutiny of hard-bitten men who eyed his approach with hostile gaze. For strangers were not welcome in Sundog.

Probing eyes saw a lean face weathered to a smoky bronze. There was an aggressive slant to the newcomer's jaw; and as the wide-brimmed hat was pushed back over a sweaty forehead, his lancing eyes beat down the direct stare of a knot of men grouped before one of the buildings. Their boots shifted uneasily. The newcomer grinned coldly as he dismounted from his horse.

"Friendly sort of community," he ventured. "Yeah!" He stretched his six foot, saddle-weary frame and then hitched his mount to the rack.

From the doorway of the smoke-choked frame building, which seemed to be the pulse of Sundog's nocturnal festivities, came the sound of raucous laughter, the questionable melody of an ancient piano, and a charivari of voices. Faraday walked toward the saloon, idly rolling himself a smoke.

Suddenly he stopped short, his high heels digging into the dirt. Above the sounds of revelry two shots had rung out.

The tinkle of the piano died with the shots. A stunned silence hung over everything for the space of seconds. Then a woman screamed. Men cursed. Came a sudden clatter of boots. Faraday barged into the saloon with a dozen others.

HANDS tore at his clothes. They pushed and shoved. Faraday thrust them aside, sent one clutching person sprawling, and squeezed into the smoke-clouded interior of the saloon. Powder smoke seeped into his nostrils as he stared at the shambles. A table was overturned. Cards lay strewn about.

A man sprawled on the floor, fingers crooked convulsively. Life was draining from him fast. Faraday's staring eyes watched a great red stain widen on the floor. The man made a terrific effort to raise himself on one elbow. Through the red froth bubbling on his lips, words ripped out.

"I—I say it ag'in, Leeds—y-yuh played — crooked! Yuh —" He coughed, with superhuman effort endeavored to crawl toward the overturned table.

Faraday's gaze was drawn to the tall figure of a man who stood looking down at the passing, a gun still clutched in a big white fist. A

A leaden slug knifed through Leeds

shiver ran through the new arrival, chilling his blood. The man stood over his victim like a great vulture.

Save for the big V of his white shirt front, he was clad entirely in black. His face was saturnine, white and hard. The nostrils of his long straight nose were pinched. The fact that he was no longer young was borne out by lines at the corners of his eyes and splotches of white at the temples.

"No man can say Stud Leeds cheats," he said, his eyes sweeping the crowd defiantly. "It was a fair game. You all saw him start to draw. You—" The words issued from his slash of a mouth like drops of molten metal. There seemed to be a pause after each word.

"I—I—s-say it ag'in!" the man on the floor jerked out. The heavy slug had gone through his lung, but he struggled against the clawing fingers of death. "Wa'n't fair, I—I t-tell yuh. Leeds, yuh low-down s-skunk! Y-Yuh cheated—y-yuh—"

Faraday stepped forward, knelt beside the stricken man. "Take it easy, old man," he said. "We'll

patch yuh up yet. I'll git a doctor. There, now—"

"'Tain't no use," the dying man gasped out. "N-nothin' kin c-cure me. I know wh-what's comin'. Leeds, you black-h-hearted skunk, s-some day yuh'll git yours. S-some day—" The screaming died to a whistling gurgle. He tried to raise himself, with the agony of death upon him. Eyes wide open, his life blood pouring out, the man seemed to shrivel in his clothes. One last convulsion and he was gone.

STUD LEEDS emitted a dry laugh, holstered his gun. His lips curled; he swept a hurried glance about him. For a brief moment his gaze fell upon young Faraday, then turned away.

"Anybody here say Wormsley didn't draw first?" he cracked. "Any *hombre* here say I didn't pull that jack of hearts out of his sleeve? Speak up, gents! You, Sheriff, you saw—"

A tall, thin-faced man coughed nervously, looking from the body of the dead man to Leeds. "Reckon I saw yuh take a jack of hearts out of Wormsley's sleeve, Stud. Yeah. He was desp'rate tuhnight, Stud. Playin' for high stakes. Made a fool play."

Faraday's lips curled into a sneer as he shot a glance at the sheriff. "Seemed like a likable cuss," he drawled, looking down at the corpse. "Don't look like he knew how to handle cards thataway. Hands kind of rough like. Seems very funny a gent wouldn't see him sleeve that jack—"

Leeds' fishy eyes gleamed, took on a saffron hue. Men backed away. They knew that killer light. They had looked upon its venom only a few moments before.

The gambler walked up to young Faraday.

"Meanin' what, kid?" he purred. "Reckon you're a stranger in Sundog. No man dares talk tuh Stud Leeds thataway!" His eyes fell to Faraday's guns, then strayed to his hands. The deadly eyes narrowed. "Slim fingers yuh got, kid," he observed. "Wear gloves a lot? Take care of 'em, huh? Why?" The last word was a command.

Faraday looked straight into Leeds' eyes and laughed softly. Breaths hissed inward through clenched teeth.

"Got tuh take care of 'em," he replied. "I figure a man can't play the pianer if he lets his fingers go. I like music—Stud. I—"

The gambler fell back a step, laughed sneeringly. The tension snapped.

Young Faraday moved over toward the bar.

"Wait a minute," rasped Stud Leeds. "Reckon we like music, too. You play, savvy? Go over to that pianer an' play! Let's see them lily white fingers do whut yuh say they kin do."

Faraday looked back at Leeds, simply nodded his head and walked toward the ancient piano. A sallow-faced individual vacated the stool and the newcomer sat down.

FARADAY'S fingers rippled along the dirty ivory keyboard. He played a melody the like of which had never been heard in Sundog. He played while men dragged the body of Wormsley out into the night. Suddenly Leeds' voice halted Faraday's fingers.

"That's all," he commanded. "A musician, huh? I was hopin' diff'rent." He ambled forward, finger hooked into the armpit of his vest. "Remember, nobody talks free an' easy with Stud Leeds. I would've killed yuh a minute ago, if yuh'd been a man. But you're a kid who don't know no better." He took another look at Faraday's guns, set his

lips strangely, then turned and walked out of the saloon.

"Reckon yuh're just a lucky dam' fool kid," the tall man with the star said to Faraday. "Tired of livin', mebbe."

"MEBBE," mocked the young fellow. "Reckon yuh play mighty safe, Sheriff." The thrust brought a flush of anger to the tall man's face. Somebody laughed.

"I advise yuh to pull freight," recommended the sheriff. "Yuh don't seem to know enough tuh keep your mouth shut. I ain't responsible for fool kids that ain't old enough tuh—"

"Like the town," interrupted Faraday. "Think I'll stay here a while. Lots of excitement." Without another word, he, too, left the place.

"Got guts," commented one of the company.

"He's a cool one," added another. "But I jus' can't figger him."

Faraday led his horse to a stable, made sure that it was well fed, then angled across the street to the hotel. It was a rude two-story structure of eight rooms. An effort of the landlord to draw him into conversation was spiked immediately. He planked three silver dollars down on the rickety desk.

"I'm tired," he said. "All I want to talk about is a bed."

Upstairs, in the room to which he was shown, Faraday slumped down on the bed when he was left alone, but the weariness he had feigned downstairs had slipped away from his face. His eyes stared at the half open window and he was seeing Wormsley lying on the floor of the saloon, his grim executioner standing over his body.

From Faraday's eyes faded the devil-may-care expression that had been in them when he was riding into Sundog. A vague expression of doubt clouded his vision now. He looked at his long thin fingers, rubbed them nervously together and then got to his feet.

On the wall hung a large cracked mirror. Faraday's splayed fingers struck for his gun. The .45 leaped to his fingers just as the door opened —slowly. He whirled, gun leveled. A man stood in the doorway, a tired-eyed, elderly man. A thin smile passed over the visitor's face.

"Fast," he commented. "Kinda fast, boy. But I've seen lots faster." Then he walked in slowly, his eyes riveted on Faraday's face. "Was in the saloon when yuh talked up," he continued. "My name's Durkin, Jed Durkin. Whut yuh say your name was, boy?"

"Faraday," came the steady reply. "Bill Faraday." He saw a flicker in the older man's eyes.

"Don't mind if I stay an' talk a while, do yuh?" inquired the visitor, tossing his hat to the rickety table. He was a solidly built man, past middle age. His sandy thatch was plentifully streaked with gray. The eyes under the bushy brows seemed haunted by something, and somehow Faraday knew that they had harbored the expression for many years.

"FARADAY?" Durkin repeated, looking at the young man. "Faraday. A good name. I was hopin' mebbe—" He paused and smiled wearily. "Yuh play the pianer well. Them fingers was made to work fast, boy. On ivories or on gun handles, mebbe?"

"Look here," said Faraday directly, "what d'yuh want? My business ain't no concern of—"

"You saw what happened in the saloon?" interrupted Durkin, jaw hard as steel. "It was you that said to Leeds—"

"About the jack of hearts?" prompted Faraday.

"Yeah," said Durkin, pausing to listen. Hearing no sounds, he leaned

forward. "Poor Wormsley was right. He didn't have that up his sleeve," declared the visitor. "I know I can trust you, boy. I wanted to tell somebody. I been hopin'—well, this town's bad! Worse than it was twenty year ago. I been away from it.

"Come back a week ago, to do somethin'."

INTO the man's eyes came a hard glitter. His fingers curled. Then Faraday saw him shrink. In a few seconds Durkin appeared to grow very old. "But I'm not man enough," he said bitterly. "Too old. My fingers've stiffened, boy. My eyes are dimmed a little. I went away after Johnny Haskell was killed—twenty year ago."

Faraday sat in his chair like a man of stone. Durkin's eyes bored into him.

The young man met his aged visitor's glance. It was an effort to keep his eyes level, for Durkin's seemed to have the power to probe into his very brain, read the thoughts milling there. Lips set, body tense, Faraday succeeded in staring Durkin down.

"Go on," he said.

"Twenty year ago I saw something happen," the narrator continued. "Just about the same as what took place tonight. Leeds was playin' for big stakes with Johnny Haskell. Fifteen thousand dollars, and a ranch worth as much again. Leeds was desperate. Everythin' depended on the last hand.

"An' then as he picked up his cards, I saw his eyes grow wild. I knew he was beat, boy. Stud Leeds was beat! And Johnny Haskell was there smilin' as he looked over his hand. We all waited to see how Leeds would take it. Then he cursed and reached out and he flipped a card from Johnny Haskell's sleeve. The ace of spades!"

Faraday smothered words that bubbled from his lips. His fingers splayed and gripped the edges of his chair. Durkin did not speak for several minutes.

After a while, he took up his story again.

"Johnny just sat there, his jaw saggin', lookin' at the card, lookin' at us like he was dazed, kind of. *Then Leeds shot him, shot him* before Johnny could get over the shock an' go for his own gun. I kin see him now, his face still wearin' that stunned look, an' the color goin' from his skin and onto his chest comin' a great red blotch.

"I can hear the cry yet that wrung from Tom Glennister's lips. I hear it all the time. He come up to Leeds, his hand on his gun, and stared him full in the eyes.

He was goin' to say somethin', then stopped.

"'Draw!' Stud Leeds said. 'Draw, Glennister! I shot Haskell for cheatin' at cards. There's no law sayin' I ain't got a right.'"

"Y-Yuh mean," queried Faraday through tight lips, "that Glennister backed down? He was Johnny Haskell's friend and he—?" Somehow, he had to take his eyes away from this man.

"HE had a wife, Tom had," Durkin went on. "An' Tom knew he could never beat Leeds to the draw. He just turned an' staggered out, a broken man. Boy, Glennister was indirectly responsible for Haskell's death!"

The listener swore softly, waiting for Durkin to resume his recital.

"Tom couldn't stay in Sundog. He went away one night, him and his wife.

"Tom Glennister had showed Stud Leeds that trick.

"He was no gambler, but a wizard when it came to workin' with a deck of cards. Him and Leeds were

friendly enough. Tom showed him how to work that trick. And Leeds had practiced it and when he got into a hole he used it on Glennister's friend and Glennister didn't dare call his hand!"

"The skunk!" Faraday heard himself say. "The rotten coyote. And tonight Leeds was in a big game again, was he? The stakes were high?"

"THEY were. Wormsley owed him money. He put his ranch up as a last chance to get back what he had lost. Leeds has cleaned up thousands of acres of territory since I been gone—with his rotten, crooked fingers. He's a power here. No man dares to call his hand. And out there, just over the ride, is a couple of kids who haven't got a roof over their heads."

"Snakes were made to get killed," said Faraday through tight lips. "Leeds is worse than a snake. He—"

"They took that ace of spades and buried it with Johnny Haskell," continued Durkin. "Put it in his empty leather wallet and buried it with him. Leeds thought of that one, boy!

"'Take it to hell with yuh,' Stud said when they put Johnny Haskell in his grave. That's what he said. An' Tom Glennister, if he's alive, is goin' through the tortures of the damned."

"He should have shot Leeds in the back," Faraday ripped out. "He had a reason to."

"Tom couldn't do that," objected Durkin. "It wasn't in him. I saw him last, standin' by Johnny Haskell's grave, an' he was sayin' somethin' out loud. Somethin' about somebody who held a hole card against every rotten murderer, an' some day he'd play it ag'in Stud Leeds."

Faraday got up and paced the floor.

Durkin watched him, his eyes searching for an elusive something. After a while, he shook his head and rose to go.

"Leeds, he knows you?" Faraday turned to ask.

"No, he don't remember me," replied Durkin. "Leastwise, he don't act that way." He stopped and looked at the younger man. Deliberately, he spoke. "It's a rotten thing to shoot a man in the back. Any *hombre* who does it ought tuh get hung. But then, mebbe hangin' ain't so bad. Some day, mebbe—" He shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"Think it over, old timer," said Faraday. "Maybe Tom Glennister was right. There's a Gent who holds a hole card against us all. Let's wait until He sits in on the game."

Durkin went out. Faraday wondered if he had really seen the vestige of a smile on the tired face of his visitor.

Bill Faraday sat by the window for an hour, watching the main street of Sundog. Despite the fact that he had been in the saddle most of the day, he had no thought of sleep. Durkin's story had shocked him into wakefulness.

"TWENTY years, eh?" he said aloud with a grimace as he spread his hands out before him and contemplated them with listless eyes. A long time—twenty years.

Yet time, it seemed, had not slowed up the strike of the King Cobra—Leeds.

Faraday's eyes glistened with a strange light. His long thin fingers tapped against his knees as he gazed out into the darkness. Yes, it had been up to Glennister and Durkin to even things up for Johnny Haskell. He, Bill Faraday, was young. Life was sweet, and most of it was ahead of him. To face Leeds for the sake of old Tom Glennister was utter folly. It meant sure destruc-

tion. He had watched the deadly-eyed gambler's movements back in the saloon. They had been unbelievingly swift.

Bill Faraday picked up his dusty hat, snuffed out the guttering, smoky lamp and walked out of the room. Shifty-eyed men watched him stalk through the little smoke-filled hotel lobby toward the door. When he had gone out, a bearded man cursed hoarsely and turned to one of his cronies.

"GUNMAN," he said. "Yuh see them hands, The way he carried his guns? Lookin' fer somebody. Seems like I've seed him some'eres—"

"He'll git whut he's lookin' fer in Sundog," laughed another. "Come tuh the right place."

Faraday walked across the street toward the livery stable. He stopped as a buckboard rattled into Sundog. A lantern swung in the rear. Three men rode on the front seat. As it passed, Faraday felt a cold finger trace his spinal cord. He smelled fresh earth, saw a pickaxe and two spades on the floor of the wagon.

"Reckon yuh ain't leavin' right away, boy?" whispered a voice at him.

Faraday turned. A thin mist had swirled down on Sundog. He leaned forward to get a look at the man. It was Durkin. A faint sneer was on Durkin's lips.

"No," replied the young stranger, "just takin' a ride. Can't sleep, old timer."

He hooked a thumb at the rattling buckboard.

"The grave diggers?" His voice was dry.

"Yeah," replied Durkin. "Wormsley. They got a sort of modern cemetery, right outside of town. Ain't like where they buried Johnny Haskell. The briars is growed up all around the old buryin' ground. Two miles out, it is. Reckon yuh'd like tuh see it?"

"No!" snapped Faraday. "Good God, man, show some sense! Yuh ridin' out tuh look at that graveyard this time of night? One of Leeds' men happens to spot you, an' what'd happen? It won't be healthy for yuh, Durkin. Yuh plumb loco? No, I ain't in no mood to go lookin' at buryin' grounds. Reckon I'm ridin' my way. See yuh later."

"Yuh're right, boy," agreed the older man. "But I been out there. I pulled the briars away an' got a look at the old flat stone me an' Tom Glennister put up fer him. Well, g'night, boy!"

Bill Faraday rode out of Sundog. Leeds and the sheriff saw him go. They stood on the steps of the saloon and laughed crookedly.

"Looks like the town's too tough fer the pianer player," observed Leeds. "Reckon he ain't needin' advice twice. Yuh ever see the *hombre* before?"

The sheriff looked at his companion. There was a trace of concern in the gambler's voice. "No, never did," replied the man of the law.

TWO hours later, with the mists swirling down over the bleak terrain, Bill Farraday was riding through a clump of jackpines and came to a little clearing. He got down from his horse and walked through the tangled briars. The ground under his boots was bumpy. He stooped down and examined an old mound. A rotten board toppled as he brushed against it.

He pushed away the briars with his gloved hands and searched for a flat headstone.

In one corner of the old burying ground he found it. Kneeling beside it, he struck a match. Tom Glennister and Durkin had evidently tried to hack an epitaph on one side

of the stone. Moss had partly obliterated their crude efforts.

"Johnny Haskell," said Faraday solemnly, "yuh been waitin' a long time." That was all. He kicked at the lush earth, swore softly, then pushed his way out through the briars. He rode back to Sundog, entered his hotel room and slept until morning.

Stud Leeds stopped Faraday in his tracks as the youngster ventured out into the street and headed for the restaurant.

"HEERD yuh was ridin' last night," he said. "Why?"

"Seems like a gent can't move without writin' a story about it," retorted Faraday, wetting his lips. "Reckon there ain't a law against a man goin' out tuh pick up a saddle bag he'd lost, Stud. I had some trinkets in it that I didn't want tuh lose."

Leeds' fishy eyes flashed with sudden anger. "Look here, kid," he snarled, "I run Sundog. I ask anybody whut I please an' I expect them tuh answer. I don't like yuh! Reckon I'd pack up an' go where there's more welcome." With a sudden movement, he ripped the kid's vest half off.

His talon-like fingers tore at Bill Faraday's woolen shirt.

"Lookin' for somethin'?" cracked the young man. "No, I don't wear a badge. I ain't a sheriff. But if I was, why ought it tuh bother yuh, Stud?"

The gambler grunted and pushed Faraday away from him. Men laughed sneeringly. But Faraday stood and took it, eyes blazing. Then he walked away. Across the street a man spat into the dust, cussed, and strode off. It was Durkin.

After he had eaten, Bill Faraday saddled his horse and rode out of Sundog again. In the restaurant he had heard talk of the Wormsleys, the two who were left—a girl and a boy.

"Somebody ought tuh tell 'em," he had declared. "I reckon if yuh haven't the nerve, any of yuh, I'll do it. Tell me just how tuh git there."

The Wormsley ranch was not far from town. Bill Faraday rode through the gate and up to the small ranch house. A girl came out before he got down from his horse. She was not yet out of her teens. Looking at the stranger with a question hovering on her quivering lips, a sudden fear spread over her pinched white face.

"Wh-who are you?" she asked in a half whisper. "Who—?"

A boy came out then, just a tousle-headed, freckle-faced youngster. He stood behind his sister, lower jaw hanging wonderingly.

"Bill Faraday's my name. I just came into Sundog last night." The speaker faced the girl and words thickened in his throat. She read tragedy in his silence.

"Pa?" she cried. "Pa!" Her voice rose to a shriek. "He—he—"

BILL FARADAY nodded. "He played cards with Leeds, ma'am. Somethin' happened."

A choked sob broke from the boy, who ran away into the house. His sister stiffened, one hand straying helplessly to her throat. Her eyes glistened, but she fought back the tears.

"I—I knew," she whispered. "He didn't come home. I waited—hours. He didn't come home. He didn't—he'll never come home!" She swayed and Faraday reached out to support her.

Just then horsemen thundered into the yard. The young messenger of woe whirled in a flash. Stud Leeds' eyes glared at him. The gambler's horse came near to riding Faraday down. Stud Leeds slipped from his

horse. "Yuh?" he rasped. "What yuh doin' on my ranch?" His hands were close to his guns.

"Why, I didn't know it belonged to you," replied Faraday. "I come out tuh tell her about Wormsley—her father. Figgered she had a right tuh know."

"Well, I own it now," announced Leeds. "Git out! Yuh hear me, Faraday? I'll give yuh one minute."

"I'm agoin'," replied Bill Faraday, "but yuh can't kick those kids out, Stud. They got a month tuh vacate. Seems like yuh owe it to 'em. Seems rotten when their pa ain't hardly cold yet. Seein' as how—"

LIKE lightning, Leeds struck for his gun. Faraday folded his arms, turned his back and walked to his horse. It took every tiny drop of courage in his frame, but he steeled himself for the shock of a bullet.

"Yaller!" taunted the gambler. "Yaller. Ride out, an' keep on ridin'. I ain't one tuh shoot even a yaller-bellied pianer player in the back. But if yuh horn in on my affairs agin, I'm comin' at yuh."

Faraday rode away. For two days he was not seen in Sundog, and then one night he rode in. His face was pasty white, as if he had seen a ghost. Lips drawn tightly over clenched teeth, he got down from his mount and strode silently into the saloon.

The chattering of voices broke off. A battery of eyes fixed themselves on the returning stranger. There was an aura of destruction hovering in the very atmosphere. Sitting in the gloom of a far corner, the man named Durkin uttered a hoarse, almost inarticulate cry and leaned forward a little in his chair.

Stud Leeds turned his head. Faraday's eyes lanced him. There was a smirk on the youngster's lips. Men crowded against the walls as Stud Leeds slowly rose from his chair.

"Yuh come tuh git killed, Faraday?" ripped out the gambler, eyes hard and cold as chips off a cake of ice. "Well, show yore hand!"

"I hear yuh're quite a gambler," drawled Faraday. "I play somethin' of a game myself. I come tuh play at your own game, Stud. Want tuh try your luck?"

Leeds' hands swept down. He stared at Faraday and then his great taunting laugh boomed out.

"I don't see the joke," said the young challenger, eyes flashing. "No, it isn't a joke tuh play with you, Stud! I play my horse an' five thousand dollars against the Wormsley ranch. I ought tuh get odds. I'm not one of your reputation, Stud!"

"Sit down!" ordered Leeds. "It's a go. Swifty, bring two decks of new cards."

The word went through Sundog like a brush fire. Men crowded into the saloon. Conversation died. The silence was ripped apart by the breaking open of the new card decks. Leeds shuffled them, handed them to Faraday. A few of the more timid citizens sidled away. They would wait to hear about it afterward. When they heard shots, they would come rushing back in.

LEEDS cut for the deal. He won, riffled the cards again. Then he dealt the hands. Chips clicked. Bill Faraday, face set into an expressionless mask, dropped his hand face down.

The wind whistled through the teeth of the tensed gallery.

"Too bad," said Leeds. "Deal 'em, Faraday." He threw down his hand. A diamond flush.

"Not lucky tuhnight," commented Faraday. His eyes strayed to Durkin. The man's face was ghastly in hue.

Bill Faraday picked up the cards clumsily, dealt again. The stack of chips at his elbow had shrunk to a

puny pile. His long white fingers flipped the pasteboards out. He picked up his hand, looked at it. He opened with half of the blue chips he had left.

"Think my luck has turned," was his remark. "Got the guts tuh cover this?"

Without a word, Leeds smiled coldly and pushed an equal pile of blues into the center of the table. He followed it up with another. A sneer came from his mouth, a dry, triumphant cackle.

"Think well of the hand, don't yuh, Faraday?" he mocked. "Well, push 'em out."

THE onlookers gasped. Bill Faraday threw his hand away. "It was a fair hand," he said, staring into Leeds' sinister face, "but I don't figger a straight is good enough tuh beat Stud Leeds. I'll wait for the next hand."

"Hagh!" spat Leeds. "I thought this was a game. It's like stealin' candy from a kid. Deal an' git it over. Toss in them last chips, Faraday, an' then go back tuh mama!" He showed his hand and sneered. "A pair of eights! Hagh!"

A ripple went through the gallery. Taunting snickers. Some of the onlookers sidled away. Bill Faraday pushed his last stack of chips into the center of the table. Leeds dealt. He placed the pack at his elbow and looked over his hand.

Faraday lunged forward. His long thin fingers flashed at Leeds' sleeve. As if by magic, a card appeared, an old weather-beaten card, yellowed with age.

As Stud Leeds' eyes widened with stark horror, Faraday slammed it to the table.

"The ace of spades!" snapped Bill Faraday. "The ace of spades. Look at it, Stud Leeds, yuh damned cheat!"

Men backed away. Some flung themselves down on the floor. But one staggered toward the gaming table, eyes wild, lips babbling something. He looked at the ace of spades and a choking cry ripped out.

"Johnny Haskell's ace of spades!" he yelled madly. "By God!"

Terror had seized Leeds. For split seconds it shook him in a worrying grip. Desperation leaped into his eyes, as a voice bit into his brain. It cried a warning.

The gambler's hand clawed for his gun, but Bill Faraday's gun was already thundering. A leaden slug knifed through Leeds. He staggered, choked out a curse and steadied himself against the table. Beads of sweat glistened on his pasty face. Horror clouded his fishy eyes.

Then red rage came in a flood. He reeled around, caught himself and tried to bring up his gun. Bill Faraday, mouth set in an icy grin, shot Leeds in the stomach.

"That one," he cracked, "was for Tom Glennister!"

THE name tore into Leeds' numbed brain. As he sagged, he looked up at his executioner. A face swam in the bloody mist that hovered in front of his eyes—a familiar face. Words came from the grim mouth, devastating words that seemed to crackle like thunder.

"The ace of spades, Leeds," taunted Faraday. "Johnny Haskell's ace of spades! It smells like the grave, Leeds! You'll take it to hell with you. Like yuh told Johnny Haskell!"

Wracked with agony, Leeds fought to rise to his feet. His jaw sagged horribly. One hand was clutched to his stomach, as if he were trying to hold in his life. With an agonizing effort, he lifted his face. Bill Faraday's was only a bobbing, indefinable something now.

"Wh-who are y-you?" he mumbled

through his whitening lips. "Yuh d-devil! Wh-who—?"

"Bill Glennister!"

Durkin ran forward. "Boy! I knowed it—I knowed it!" He looked down at Leeds. "What did Tom tell Johnny Haskell?" he screamed at the bullet-ridden man. "Yuh skunk, he told him somebody'd play a hole card. God did! But yuh never'll see Him. Yuh ain't goin' His direction. That's it, die, damn yuh! How's it feel? Listen, Stud, I'm laughin' at yuh!"

Leeds attempted to raise his massive frame from the fouled floor of the saloon. Terror spread over his death mask. It was still frozen there when they carried him, stiff and stark, out into the night.

"Reckon that's all," said Bill Glennister. "Guess I'll be goin' home." He tossed the gun into one corner of the room. "Ain't no more use for it. Never was much of a hand with 'em."

"Them fingers, boy!" shouted Durkin. "For playin' the pianer, huh? I oughta knowed. Tom Glennister taught yuh that card trick! Yuh kept them fingers nice an' flexible so's—"

"Tuh kill a snake," smiled young Bill Glennister. "I went out an' dug up that ace of spades, old timer. It was soggy, but I dried it out and brought it in tuh show Leeds. It took limber fingers tuh play that trick with that old card. Yes—" his voice lowered to a whisper, "yes, I had tuh get it from Johnny Haskell."

"Reckon yuh caught him cheatin', son," horned in the sheriff ingratiatingly to young Glennister. "Reckon we've waited a long time fer somebody with the guts tuh draw ag'in Leeds. We—"

Young Glennister grinned. "My pa said I wasn't fast enough tuh beat anybody, tuh say nothin' of Leeds. It was that ace that held up Leeds for a few seconds. The hole card, old timer! Like pa told poor Johnny. Well, I'm goin' home. Comin, old timer?"

Durkin's eyes were moist. "Tuh see old Tom? Boy, I—"

On the way, Bill Glennister and old Durkin stopped to say good-by to Johnny Haskell. Durkin knelt down on the freshly turned earth.

"I reckon that evens things fer Tom," he murmured. "I'll tell him yuh said so." Then he rose and beckoned to young Glennister. "Le's ride, Billy," he smiled. "Le's ride fast."

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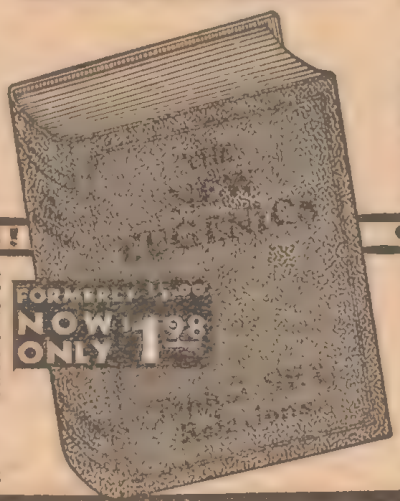

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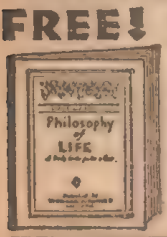

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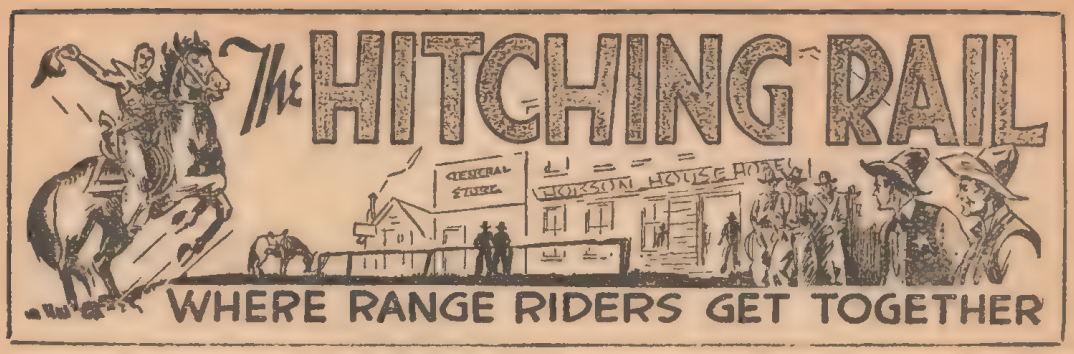

WELL, folks an' everybody, hola again, an' here's my ol' shirt most wore out tryin' tuh reach for all these plumb interestin' letters what comes a-rollin' in with every mail.

Never seen so many pen-slingers as is writin' us how they likes the stories our chief's givin' yuh these days. And ain't every one of 'em a real yarn, straight from a westerner what knows his beans an' bacon? I'll say so!

Fella kin hear saddle-creakin' leather an' rompin' broncs in every one. Them boys an' gals shore rides hard an' some plenty slick.

Swap Column's Growin'

And our swap column's growin' right nice, every issue, tuh say nothin' of all th' folks joinin' up in our *Range Riders' Club*. Folks, we're shore spreadin' around a heap. From Californy tuh Maine we're ridin' trail more'n more these days, shakin' hands with a heap o' swell fellas an' girls. Sittin' here's like knowin' th' whole world, an' then some, an' smilin with 'em all. Makes th' old pump warm.

Well, let's go! Who's top o' th' heap this time? Here's a real nice letter from Miss Bonny McNeal, o' Kansas City. Bonny, write us again. Yore warm heart shore speaks when yore pen moves. Yuh got enthusiasm, an' ain't that somethin'?

Makes every day bigger an' better in ev'ry way, like some fella said. And yuh've rode range with yore brother, out Wyomin' way. Fine! Reckon yuh misses bein' there, right this minute. Yuh asks about "horse sense," Bonny, an' wants tuh know is they anything in it.

Some Hosses Knows a Heap

Bonny, they shore is. Some hosses knows a heap. More'n some humans. As tuh knowin' one person, personal like, I ain't so sure. Some says yes, an' some says no. Me, I been round broncs all my life an' loved a heap of 'em, but I ain't never seen a hoss what wouldn't eat outa any fella's hand same as mine, an' stay satisfied in any corral where they's oats an' hay. But they shore *is* what we cowmen calls "one man hosses," what goes fine under one man an'll bust in half under other riders.

After a lifetime with hosses, I'll say hoss sense shows in various ways, specially as tuh havin' th' bump o' locality. Hard tuh lose any hoss on earth, after he's lived in a place a while. Take 'im quite a ways from home, turn 'im loose, an' he'll go back if not stopped.

An' on his own range, yuh jest cain't lose 'im, winter or summer, blizzard or sand storm. An' a hoss knows bad water from good. Cain't force 'im tuh drink from a creek or other place if he sniffs, snorts an' backs away. He's through, an' yuh better not drink that water, no time, if he won't.

Rope Sense

An' take a black night on a trail, when th' rider cain't see his bronc's ears. Ef yore hoss stops, don't force 'im ahead afore yuh git down on th' ground an' walk ahead yoreself, watchin' yore step. Some instinct's told 'im they's a canyon or bluff or dangerous place ahead an' he won't budge. I've saw that many a time, an' thank Gawd I took th' hint, or I wouldn't be here today. Lots o' hosses has rope sense, too.

Once used tuh a rope, th' hoss'll stand when tangled up, till somebody unwinds 'im. Other broncs is plumb foolish thataway an' never learn a rope. They'll fight an' burn theirselves plumb raw on laigs an' other places.

And some hosses is shore tender-hearted an' appreciates gentleness. A rough man with quirt or spur or bit'll be hated a heap, while under a decent fella th' same hoss'll go like a trained circus hoss, glad tuh work an' obey. An' a bronc has a long memory.

Ever git him real scairt of any place an' he'll never git over it. No lickin', no treatment 'o any sort'll cure 'im. The fright'll remain all his life. I could tell yuh a lotta times when a hoss acted thataway, but I must git on tuh th' next letter.

Remember this, Bonny: Th' better yuh treat a hoss, th' more sense he'll have.

What's a Trajectory?

Who's next? Johnny Hicks, o' Milwaukee. Johnny, how's that ridin' on skiis up yore way? Me, I done it a whole winter in Yellowstone Park, over twenty foot o' ice cream on th' level, an' it shore hardens a man's muscles. But th' first time I went downhill I shore traveled in all directions at onct. Landed spittin' snow an' tryin' tuh find my laigs. Johnny asks what's a trajectory, an' what's meant by drift, an' other questions 'bout rifle shootin'.

Well, Johnny, we only got jest so much space for each fella, an' I'll do th' best I kin this time. Later, some more maybe. The "trajectory" is the course traveled by a bullet, from muzzle of gun to target. It is a curved line, straight from muzzle to target, the curve starting at the muzzle and going upward to the center of the curve, then falling to the target.

The higher-powered the rifle, the "flatter" the trajectory. If you throw a baseball as far as you can, you have to toss the ball slightly upward so it will travel the farthest. The trajectory of such a thrown ball is, of course, very curved and the curve going high at its center.

The range is less, of course, than when yuh shoots a rifle, from which the bullet is driven by a powerful load of powder. Technically, trajectory is described as "the path described by a bullet in the air, moving under the combined influences of the force of propulsion, the force of gravity, and the resistance of the air."

What "Drift" Means

By "drift" we mean the lateral deviation of the bullet caused by the resistance of the air (windage) and by the rotation of the bullet on its longer axis. All bullets are made long, (not round any more), and the bullet rotates to the *right* on the long axis. This, combined with whatever wind may be blowing, causes the bullet to "drift" to the right.

Of course, if a strong wind be blowing from the right, the drift would be to the left. On all good rifles is what we call a "wind gauge," for correcting drift.

"Canting" the rifle (twisting it slightly to one side in your hands) will destroy good shooting and cause drift in the direction of the cant, as well as hitting lower on the target. The front and rear sights *must* be held vertical.

Sorry not to answer your other questions, Johnny, but space is limited.

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(Continued on page 124)

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(Continued from page 123)

riders grows big an' some tall, believe me. Dolly asks ef all hosses is natural swimmers an' how we take our broncs crost rivers, whether we leave our saddles on or not, etc.

They All Does It Natural

Dolly, yuh lives out in th' God's country where I once prospected an' shore went hungry. But it's a rider's paradise, all right. That picture o' yore hoss is fine, but why didn't yuh git on an' let me have a squint at yuh? I loves Nevada gals a heap. Now, as tuh hosses swimmin', Dolly, they all does it natural.

I never knowed a hoss what couldn't swim, but some swims a heap easier'n others, jest liks humans. Turn a herd o' broncs loose an' they'll all cross rivers easy. But when a hoss is saddled an' mounted an' rode intuh deep water, that's different again.

Fella has tuh know his stuff or he may drown. When we can, we always takes off our saddles and sends 'em across by boat, or on some sorta improvised raft. Then we puts 'bout three naked riders on good swimmin' hosses an' they leads th' rest acrost.

Th' herd'll usually follow easy. For th' individual rider, here's th' dope, ef yuh has tuh cross by yoreself.

Keep Cool an' Go Slow

Leave saddle an' bridle on. Cross yore stirrups in front o' your saddle horn. See that yore bridle reins is open (that is, th' ends in yore hands not fastened together or buckled) so ef th' reins gits round th' hoss' feet, they won't form a loop an' drown 'im or scare 'im tuh death when he finds hisself caught in 'em. Ef that happens, he'll struggle like all git-out, maybe even go over backward.

Sit in yore saddle easy, drive yore bronc intuh th' water easy like an' let 'im pick his way, reins a little loose. Ef you're wearin' chaps an' boots, better take 'em off first an' sling 'em acrost yore saddle, tied on, so they won't weight yuh down ef yuh git throwed or stuck. As th' hoss begins swimmin', sit easy an' guide 'im by th' reins. Keep cool, go slow, and don't force 'im.

Sometimes' th' rider rides intuh th' deep water, then swings off on th' *upstream* side, holds th' horn in one hand (the right) and swims alongside his bronc. A good way if th' horse swims low, as some do. Don't swim on th' *downstream* side, for th' hoss might roll over on yuh.

And sometimes a rider'll slip off over th' hoss' croup (behind saddle) after th'

(Continued on page 126)

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(Continued from page 124)

hoss starts swimmin', an' takes holt o' th' hoss' tail, swimmin' behind the animal. Also a good way with a good swimmin' hoss.

When swimmin' beside yore hoss, splash water against his head tuh keep 'im swimmin' in th' right direction. When swimmin' behind, yuh gotta let th' hoss take his own course. He'll usually head fer th' opposite shore an' git there.

Reach th' Other Side

Come times when a fella has got tuh ride straight into deep water saddled, bridled, with chaps, boots, spurs an' six-gun on. I've done it a heap o' times an' had good luck, but ef they's time ..h use th' other methods, use 'em; they're safer. Point is tuh reach th' other side, not tuh drown. Go slow, keep cool, an' use th' methods shown above, only enterin' deep water all rigged out when they's no other way possible.

A wise way tuh start this swimmin' business is tuh wear a bathin' suit, git on a strong-swimmin', calm hoss an' practice in quiet water a heap. On a strange bronc, go slow an' sure before yuh enters deep water.

Th' Angels Wait fer Fools

Th' angels is always waitin' fer fools. Whenever yuh reads of a fella what goes swimmin' in all his clothes, chaps, boots, spurs an' six-gun, take that *hombre's* picture an' keep it as a curio, fer he's shore a world beater—an' then some, Dolly. 'Course th' rider should always be a strong swimmer hisself—or herself. Ef yuh don't swim an' swim strong, ride tuh th' nearest bridge, an' live longer.

Jest heard from Emilio Saporiti of New York City. Well, well, Emilio, so yo're up in th' States from down Argentine way, eh? Shore glad tuh hear from yuh. Heap o' cow critters down where you comes from, and plenty of my old pals has gone down thataway, takin' a whirl at them herds o' your'n. Glad yuh likes THRILLING WESTERN.

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It kin mean a woman what tells lies, used in one sense. And it kin mean a sorta trap in which yuh ketches wild animals,

(Concluded on page 128)

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Want banjo-mandolin and mandolin, Gibson preferred, U. S. stamps. Have Underwood typewriter, books, metronome, stamps and pennies. Paul Hahle, Parsons, West Virginia.

Have radio parts, transformers, coils, condensers, headphones, crystals. Want ring, watch, boxing gloves, or what have you? M. B. Beaman, 1164 W. Green St. Decatur, Ill.

Would like carvings, curios, relics, Currier and Ives pictures for old coins, books, razors, Edison cylinder record phonograph and 75 records. John Kapsak, Sellersville, Pa.

Will trade mold for casting lead ash trays for correspondence course of Hawaiian Guitar or Ukulele or anything valuable. C. B. Cornell, 2000 Miller Avenue, Richmond, Va.

Have 300 true cowboy songs. Will trade any amount of them for cowboy chaps, or what have you? Please write Lois Upton, Warm Springs, Ala Co., Calif.

Will exchange cards tricks and magic tricks with anybody who has card tricks to exchange. Albert Speaker, Park City, Utah.

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Who wants new unused "Regal" mandolin, two-tone mahogany, white trim, guard, flat style for—what have you? All letters answered. R. F. Kittredge, Box 1065, Madison, Maine.

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Have $15 Keystone 16mm projector run by small motor. Will trade for camera, gasoline motor—or? Jack Hines, 1510 Walker, Houston, Texas.

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Have radio mike, 5 ft. bow and arrows and complete telegraph set. Want complete tattoo set. John Bell, High Street, Closter, N. J.

Who wants stamps, coins, books. Would like books on chemistry, and chemical glassware. H. Wegner, 1849 Anthony Avenue, N. Y., N. Y.

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—THE PUBLISHER.

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when used in another sense. And it kin be used, in still another way, tuh mean "bolero," what means two ten-foot ropes havin' heavy balls at their far ends and which ropes is whirled around a rider's head and flung at a hoss' laigs, thus clutterin' up his laigs and throwin' him.

You must know that that's done a heap, down in the Argentine cow country. Never used up here in our U. S. A.

Well, Emilio, that's that. *Salud y pesetas!*

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- Venereal Diseases
- How to Regain Virility
- Sexual Starvation
- Glands and Sex Instinct
- To Gain Greater Delight
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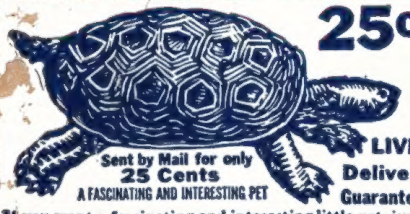

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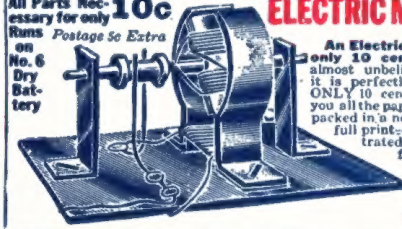

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MONEY FOR YOU AT ONCE

My amazing new Tea and Coffee Route Plans provide for your having immediate cash earnings. If you are honest and reliable and willing to take good care of the customers on one of these Routes, then you are just the person I am looking for. You will start in your own locality, right near where you live. There is nothing hard or difficult about the work. There will be no red tape connected with getting started. You won't have to rent a store, buy fixtures, or other high priced equipment to start with.

I FURNISH EVERYTHING

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details of the inside workings of this nation-wide Tea and Coffee Route Plan that is taking the country by storm. I will explain just how you go about handling the business. The plans I give you cost me thousands upon thousands of dollars and years of time to prepare. They are time-tried and proven. They have brought quick money relief to hundreds and thousands. Why not to you?

LOOK AT THESE UNUSUAL EARNINGS

My Tea and Coffee Plans are not an experiment. If you have been working part time or for low wages, this is your opportunity to get more cash immediately — money to pay your bills and live well. Here's what some have already done: Wm. E. Berkhimer, Pa., cleared $20.00 in one day and as high as $90.00 in one week. Stanford Berg, Ind., $75.00 in one week. Wm. H. Newcomb, N. Y., $24.00 in one day, $80.00 in one week. G. V. Budaus, Texas, jumped his income from $20.00 a week to $65.00 in a week. These exceptional earnings show the amazing possibilities of the offer I am now making to you. Better send me your name today and find out the great possibilities of my offer.

SEND NO MONEY—JUST NAME

Don't send me a cent. Just rush me your name so I can lay all the facts before you and then you can decide for yourself. My plans are complete. I send you absolutely free the details of my offer. I even furnish brand-new Ford Tudor Sedans to producers as an extra bonus. Send name on coupon or penny postcard. Costs nothing. Do it today.

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I have wonderful reports of the success women are having handling Neighborhood Tea and Coffee Routes. Even in their spare time they make as high as $5.00 a day. The work is light and pleasant. Mrs. Carrie McCalmant, Nebr., had earnings of $50.00 in a week, despite a sick husband and two children to take care of. Mrs. Jewel Hacket, here in Ohio, decided to try the business and she made $33.00 in seven hours. These are a few of the hundreds of exceptional earnings reported, showing what can be done with my plan.

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When I send you details of my new Neighborhood Tea and Coffee Route Plan, I also give you the rock-bottom wholesale prices on your own groceries and household necessities. This is in addition to your regular daily earnings. So you make big money in cash and save big money on the things you use in your own home.

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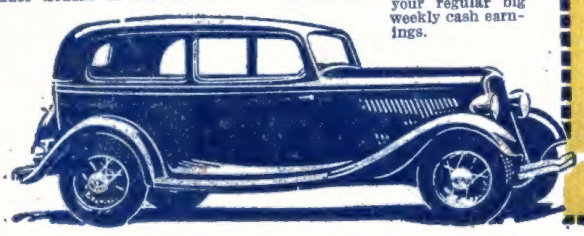
I furnish my producing Route Operators with brand-new Ford Tudor Sedans as an extra reward or bonus. This is not a prize contest or a raffle. You can get a car in addition to your regular big weekly cash earnings.



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